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2008 Year in Review

The Ultimate Retrospective

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AFRO SAMURAI®

REVENGE HAS NEVER BEEN SO SWEET, OR SO BLOODY

February 2009

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Mild Language
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XBOX 360

Letter from the Editor

In with the New

According to our year in review coverage, Condemned 2 was a big letdown and one of the more engrossing games of the year. Fallout 3 was a massive achievement and an unattractive, boring failure. Left 4 Dead continued Valve's impeccable heritage of high-level design and invention and was also lifeless and sloppy. The Xbox 360 ruled 2008, and so did the PS3. The Wii was a waste of space yet had no problem generating plenty of praise with titles like No More Heroes, Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Lost Winds—even the much-maligned Mario Kart got a thumbs up for delivering the big fun last year. But come on! A fighting game, in the arcade, for best game of the year?

Go devour our Year in Review special—a juicy 33 pages worth of special—and you'll discover we all share some dramatically different opinions on the past 12 months of gaming. In the virtual world, you control so many little bits and pieces of your surroundings, it's simply a course of logic that our experiences will all be so varied and complex and, in the end, wildly different. I could argue that there is no opinion more subjective than the one that emerges from the time spent exploring a game world. Hell, most of us can't even agree on how long a game is supposed to be to be satisfying, or if a robust online functionality is now prerequisite, or if a linear experience is immediately a blemish, or what is casual or hardcore, or what even defines proper gameplay. Prince of Persia, some say, is not a video game as much as an excuse to skate through pretty pictures. If that's true, which it's not, what's so wrong with skating through pretty pictures?

For all that is right and wrong, exasperating and celebratory, please go dig into our Year in Review and get the debate going.

If you're still reading, as an added bonus, I know how we can't get enough of lists around the holidays, so I will leave you with one final list to kick off the New Year. And in the spirit of extending the positive holiday vibe this January, here's 5 things that I think most of us can solidly agree on:

1. Games are often thought of as a loner's sport, but who amongst us can deny that 2008 was filled with exceptional titles that brought us together? Get online for co-op, battle a friend next to you, bust out your inner band with Rock Band 2, simply nail a great score and enjoy the competition on a leader board. Keep it simple, make it a family affair with the Wii. Games bring us together in new ways, the online era is upon us, and it only goes up from here.

2. Was this the best year for games? Did it fall behind last year's bounty? Does it really matter? For all its worth, 2008 gave us glimpses of a growing artform that is as exciting as it may be disappointing at times. The small, fiery developer is coming back thanks to downloadable games; co-op gameplay is about to take on new form; the industry is demonstrating forces of change and growth.

3. It's really, seriously cool to be a gamer. Nearly everyone grows up playing them now, say the latest surveys. The higher profile the industry, the more people will come inside to create more visionary experiences and find new ways to make games even cooler. 2008 is one to remember, if by the mere fact that it's another tick on the timeline of games breaking even further out of the plaything mold—while asserting the fact that there's nothing wrong with a great plaything.

4. 2008 is over, and that means it's time to look forward to a clean slate for 2009. This is when we can get over ourselves trying to distill every last drop of commentary out of last year and do what we do best as gamers: anticipate new engines, new properties, new ideas, new successes and failures—an industry that is constantly in flux, revealing month by month the Next Big Thing. Will it be Uncharted 2, Resident Evil 5, Brutal Legend, Infinity Ward's next first-person shooter? Will the next Final Fantasy live up to expectations, can Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami wow us with his latest endeavor, will Platinum Games deliver on the huge talent that drives them? How will Sony fare with the wobbly PlayStation 3, and will the Wii deliver third-party goods while giving the most impassioned gamer more Mario and Zelda-caliber experiences? How much higher will the indie movement rise, with rumblings of a Strider and other classics getting revisited? 2D presentation and gameplay structures are coming on strong again. And don't forget Heavy Rain, another Insomniac game, plenty of anticipated sequels, on and on. Maybe Miyamoto will surprise us with something other than Wii Music 2, bringing peace and good will back into the uncompromising heart of the Nintendo fan.

5. We're one year closer to Nintendo making an HD console with a little more juice. And maybe even making "gamers" happy again.

More on that last one next month.

Brady Fiechter

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Legal Mumbo Jumbo

PLAY™ (ISSN 1537-7539) is published monthly by Fusion Publishing, Inc., 29219 Canwood St., Suite 100, Agoura Hills, CA 91301. Volume 8, Issue 2. Single issue rates: $5.99, yearly newsstand value: $71.88. The one year (12 issue) subscription rate is $19.99 in the U.S., $44.99 in Canada, and $64.99 in all other foreign locales. Checks must be made payable in U.S. currency only to PLAY. Send address changes to: P.O. BOX 16567, North Hollywood, CA 91615-9684 or email play@espcomp.com For subscription service questions, call (800)694-6506. We periodically make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please write to us and include a copy of your mailing label. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue, as well as for any subscription changes to take place on any existing subscription. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials; all unsolicited material becomes the property of Fusion Publishing, Inc. Without limiting the rights of copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Fusion publishing, Inc. To reuse any material in this publication, obtain a permission request form by contacting Fusion Publishing, Inc. at (818)707-7786 [phone] or (818)707-7212 [fax]. © Fusion Publishing, Inc. All Rights Reserved, Play™, Fusion Publishing™, Play: Girls of Gaming™, Play: The Calendar™, Fusion Publishing Presents™ are trademarks and copyrights of Fusion Publishing, Inc.™ and © for all other products and the characters contained therein are owned by the respective trademark and copyright owners. All materials listed in this magazine are subject to manufacturers change and the publisher assumes no responsibility for such changes.

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2008 Year in Review

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The PlayStation 3 turns Two Years Old (Last November)

words Heather Anne Campbell

Do you remember the buzz when Microsoft updated their dashboards last November? A big to-do, it was, with much hustling and bustling. Big shiny avatars, Netflix under our HDTVs . . . why, it suddenly it felt like we'd purchased something in our sleep for our Xboxen. What was Sony's reply, we asked ourselves?

The truth is, both the Xbox and the PS3 have been slowly churning out updates for the two hard-core consoles . . . and Sony doesn't often make as big a deal about their incremental changes. The XMB still *looks* like the XMB, and the interactive icons are as gorgeous as the day they arrived in our 60-gig systems.

But now that the PlayStation 3 is two years old, it's a good time to take a gander at all that's changed for the PS3. There have been a ton of updates to the PS3 firmware, and the stuff we take for granted today wasn't always humming along inside our shiny monoliths.

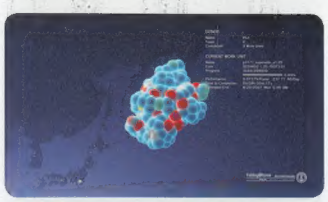
Sure, today we have *Home*, which in itself is a giant undertaking. We've got Trophies, for the players who were desperate to show off their dedication to the act of gaming. But the more subtle changes have been the ones that Play has appreciated the most. Do you remember when 1080p upscaling came to the system that won Sony the format war (making those DVDs shine just a little bit brighter on your HD flatscreen)? It wasn't long after that the PS3 began upscaling PS1 and PS2 software. There have been so many updates to the firmware that the initial features of the PS3 are all but buried under the tide. A redesigned Playstation Network store. Super White output. Photo manipulation. Printer (!!) services have all come to our PS3s. H.264, DivX, and WMV playback. Flash content. Hell, we even got the simple ability to display photos as our backgrounds on the startup menu.

Happy 2nd Birthday

And as far as hardware goes, there's an entire ridiculous range of accessories for our Piano Black boxes. PS3 owners who also have a PSP at home (and, quite frankly, the attach rate for the two systems is pretty high) can now enable Remote Play to access their PS3 on-the-go. The Playstation Eye allowed us to Video-Chat, and the Sony Bluetooth earpiece gave us graceful audio during feverish online games (and the ability to disguise our voices). We got Dualshock 3 force-feedback, and to go with our fancy controllers, Sony has just released a touch-sensitive ergonomic keypad, for chatting in-game, or for text entry in the PS3 standard web-browser. The little pad even works like a mouse when you brush your fingers over the keys.

And we haven't even mentioned the fact that you can play games on it. Or Blu-Ray movies. Sony's biggest problem might be that the PS3 can do too much; it's hard just to keep track of all the specific features of the machine. And it's only two years old. Can you imagine what it'll be capable of when it turns ... five?

"And we haven't even mentioned the fact that you can play games on it."



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Nintendo Fun Club

Earn cool stuff by buying Nintendo

Have you ever noticed those little code numbers that come inside the packaging of Nintendo-brand game releases? In Japan, gamers have been able to use those codes to earn points for a wide array of awesome stuff, including exclusive-release games and other goodies. Here in the States, our rewards were things like wallpaper downloads and AIM icons; so, in other words, a thousand times less exciting.

That was until this week, when the North American version of Club Nintendo launched. Now, by buying Nintendo titles, you can earn sweet prizes like the Game & Watch collection for DS or Mario-themed Hanafuda cards. So, make your account, register your games, and receive some swanky swag courtesy of Nintendo.

OMG HI 2 U SNAKE!

Konami + iPhone = BFF

When Steve Jobs proclaimed the iPod Touch (and via that the iPhone as well) the "best portable device for playing games," it may have been typical hyperbole from His Steveness, but it seems that some are indeed taking notice of the platform when it comes to gaming.

One of those companies is Konami, who has just announced a line of "Touch KONAMI" games aimed at getting in on the action. [illegible] far, [illegible] Silent Hill: The Escape (a 3D shooter), Dance Dance Revolution S Lite, and–crazy as it may sound–Metal Gear Solid Touch, a "touch shooting" game featuring characters and elements from MGS4. With Apple already selling 300 million apps to eager iPhone and iPod Touch owners, other big-name companies are sure to follow in Konami's footsteps.

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playback

letters@playmagazine.com

"Enjoy your gaming experiences, and don't let anyone ruin them for you!"

I was once a WoW addict, and before that I played Everquest, and I have played a few free online MMO style games. I have come to the conclusion that behind all their (or lack of) graphical glory and raiding and PVP content, they are all the same. I don't know if anyone out there feels the same way I do, but if i could get all the game developers in the world to listen, I would beg them to stop making MMO style games.

The MMO experience starts with a feeling that you are part of something big, and you feel free in a way. Free to kill whatever easy baddie you can, so that you get experience to level your character up, and then kill the bigger baddie that was laying the smack down on you 5 minutes ago. You are free to wander around a sometimes graphically beautiful game, or sometimes your trek ends up as a rather bleak walk through the world, however each time there always seems to be something to attract one's attention. A cave filled with easy baddies or treasure, a neat looking castle in the distance, or perhaps a creepy looking house that has the objective you are hunting for inside. So you explore, you level up, you become an uber-badass in whatever game you play, but then your buddy walks by with the uber badass armor set of demonic destruction of doom, and then it's on. You play more to get the badass gear that allows you to beat harder bad guys faster. You analyze your character and find his flaws in his character build and if you can reset your character points, you do maximize your damage efficiency, or if you can't do that... you recreate the sameish type of character, but you spend your character points more wisely. Wash, rinse, repeat until you are satisfied with whatever character build you come up with... good for you. But now you joined a guild and raiding begins... or mass PVP. So you begin addressing the content designed for groups larger than 10, let's say. The guild starts to raid the Dungeon of Fiery Death for the first time and find that now whatever gear and wealth they have amassed is now quite obsolete. So now the guild leader decides to implement strategy into the fights and becomes the head dictator of all things raiding. Now the game has gone from explore and have fun... to let's all stop having fun, become businesslike so some random good item will drop that will allow us to kill this guy a little faster. And so the cycle begins of spend mass amount of hours to kill the monster to get the gear to kill the monster. Or it turns into "let's pvp for hours on end so we can get the gear to allow us to pvp better for hours on end," and any concept of storyline is gone with the wind. The only thing people know about the story is the name and key characters that they get quest from or bosses they have to kill.

Some games throw some twists into the mix, but they all seem to turn out the same. And in my opinion, its the players that lose. The companies charge 15 bucks a month so everyone can go kill a monster so they can improve themselves in game and kill a bigger monster. I don't know about the rest of the world, but I really like the one time shot of 50ish dollars to get a game I can actually finish. In the meantime, in the real world people are losing their jobs, friends, spouses, and so on, just so they can play a game. And every time I visit any gaming website or look at your guys's magazine, there are always more MMO's coming out. Will the cycle ever end? Will people wake up someday and think "Man, what have I been doing in all my spare time for the past 2 years, and why don't any of my friends call me anymore"?

And so I make my plea. NO MORE MMO's!!! Let the gamer's have their happy endings or even the endings that made them wish they didn't play whatever game that was played. Just let them have an ending so they can get on with their lives, play other games, and/or do something else.

Enjoy your gaming experiences, and don't let anyone ruin them for you!

C. Brubaker

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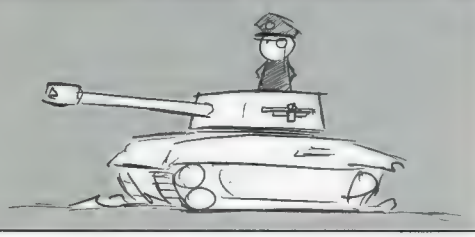
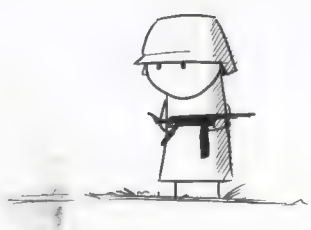
THE GAMING CLICHÉ SPOTTER GUIDE

ZE GERMANZ

Introducing a new adversary for a player to fight requires effort, planning, the generation of a back-story and motivation. Why bother with all of that when you can just set the date to 1944, slap Swastikas on the bad guys and give them German accents? How tired and predictable is the Nazi invasion of your game?



It's a war game in which historical accuracy prevails. The German army is depicted as nothing more than an efficient fighting force and the Nazis as petty, bigoted bullies. (Bonus points if they actually speak German)



☐ **500pts**

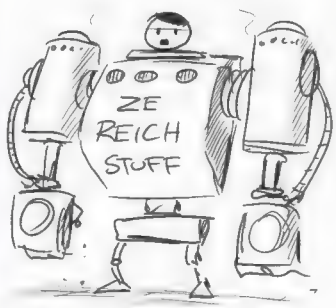
For the sake of accessibility, the Germans speak accented English. You also find yourself facing black-clad SS troops more often than the German army, because it's been decided that they look scarier.

☐ **100pts**

Alone and behind enemy lines, you're fighting blonde, blue-eyed super soldiers in an effort to thwart some pantomime scheme involving a secret German weapon that could turn the tide of the war. (Additional points are lost if said weapon has anything to do with Tesla Technology)

☐ **50pts**

According to this game; every German and their dog works for the SS, and dress to match. The sheer level of technological advancement depicted makes you wonder why the Nazis didn't just leave the Earth to establish their own Aryan Empire on Mars. ....oh, and the final boss is probably Hitler in a robotic suit....



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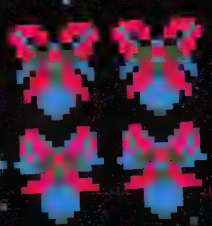

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(((Developer Sound Off)))

Growing Weary of the Wheel

words Brandon Justice

"The news is still big. It's the newspapers that got small." – Roger Ebert

In the above line, one of entertainment's most insightful voices laments the slow, sad loss of something significant in our collective consciousness. While he stops short of blaming the buyers, Ebert aptly identifies that, despite claims to the contrary, it would seem that our consumer cravings seem to have gotten the best of us.

That, at some point along the way, character, quality and innovation have been swapped out for the familiar faces of Reality TV rebels, lip-syncing bi-polar princesses and sad, sorry sequels with no soul. In short, people in this country have stopped believing in the product and started buying the package. Needless to say, there were a lot of folks who took issue with the notion that their favorite shows were less than worthy of their adoration.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I recently witnessed a similar debate in the gaming community. It seems there's been a lot of buzz surrounding the merits of the pulse-pounding parkour piece, *Mirror's Edge*. Blogger Keith Stuart threw down the virtual gauntlet to the press, essentially stating that evaluators were missing the boat on some of modern gaming's more significant moments by focusing their expectations for the nuances of the product, rather than focusing on its innovations.

The backlash was nothing short of amazing.

The response seemed to indicate that there are definitely folks who feel a great copy is often better than an unfamiliar original, and that arguably insignificant flaws can completely overshadow notably victories in the area unique gameplay.

Seriously?

Do gamers really just want us to reinvent the wheel, over and over again?

I'd like to think I know better than that, but posts of this nature definitely make me wonder why I ever gave up a gig as a blabber-mouthed, blowhard journo to take the proverbial Pacman pill and make the switch to game development.

I mean, writing about the industry was a good gig. It was challenging and fun and an undeniably awesome way to earn a living…but making games?

It's frickin' hard, man.

I mean sure, it's a good time. It's very rewarding, and every day is a genuine learning experience, but wow. As much you'd think it's a simple matter of vision, talent and teamwork, there's a healthy dose of process and politicking along the way, just like any other people-powered endeavor with a serious sense of scale.

It's been tough at times, but working as a developer has definitely given me a new appreciation for the titles that really leave their mark on an unexplored piece of interactive real estate. Further, it's made me think about why the medium is even important to me in the first place.

See, the thing is, even though video games aren't quite done developing as a creative platform, they have always been one of the few experiences in media in which we're an active participant. We listen to music, read a book, watch a movie…but in games?

We determine outcomes. We live moments. We decide fates.

The manifestations of these concepts are still in their infancy but, as we progress as an industry, their potential continues to grow. Personally, I find this very exciting. No matter what you think about a game's female lead or its frame rate or the clunky combat engine, the ability to really connect with people on an emotional and physical level gets stronger with each new console, and the impact of this evolution cannot be understated.

"Each generation has brought with it significant breakthroughs..."

Vocalist Imogen Heap once crooned that "music is worthless unless it can make a complete stranger break down and cry." While I think she was being a bit too emo for her own good with that line, it's important to note that this desire to connect is a significant thing in any true art form.

In that sense, *Mirror's Edge* delivers like few games ever have. While games like *Prince of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed* are focused on intuitive, simple navigation mechanics, EA DICE have opted to make movement urgent, intense…exhilarating. I've played sequences where I ran "for my life," but the way *ME* effortlessly inserts the User into an all-out action extravaganza is something truly revolutionary. My heart raced, I frantically looked around for my next move, and I absolutely hurled myself through levels in an effort to makes it out alive.

Was it perfect? No way. Was it more entertaining than one of the 50+ FPS titles that shipped this year?

Absolutely.

And sure, trying to run and gun you way through the game isn't exactly easy. But ultimately, the game is about finding your way ***out*** of trouble, not finding new and creative ways to ***cause*** it. In some senses, that's way more interesting to me than anything else happening this year.

But yeah…books, movies, photography, film - they all impact us in ways that are universally appreciated and understood by the majority of society - but the main reason I left writing to make games is simply this:

I genuinely believe that games will eventually eclipse all these mediums in their ability to deliver the things that entertainment works hard to achieve: Experience. Emotion. Imagination. The feeling of being someone else…doing something extraordinary…making a difference. And sure, games are obviously enduring one hell of an awkward adolescence, but games like *ME, Bioshock,* and even *Heavy Rain* can't help but make me feel that we're well on our way to something better.

Each generation has brought with it significant breakthroughs; the kind that irrevocably alter the way we think about the future of our hobby. The thing is, these breakthroughs are still the exception, and not the rule. Whether folks want to admit it or not, change in that department could be as simple as our willingness to insist upon it through the packages we pick. If there's any truth to that notion, let's hope 2009 is a year in which we all do our part to give the industry better choices going forward, instead of suggesting ones that are clearly holding us back.

Brandon Justice is working on giving football fans a choice as design director for the fine folks at Play Hard sports. Feel fell him how much you hated Mirror's Edge at bjustice@playhard.net.

Brandon Justice
My top 5 2008 games
1 LittleBigPlanet (PS3)
2 Left 4 Dead (Xbox 360)
3 Mirror's Edge (Xbox 360, PS3)
4 Fallout 3 (Xbox 360, PS3)
5 World of Goo (Wii)

NPD GROUP

DATABASE

FEBRUARY **2009**

Database 2008: Read it and weep.

The OK news

Arguably the hardest (but ever so rewarding) game of 2008, Sonic Unleashed, managed to sell 137,000 copies in its first week on sale (US) showing that the enthusiast gamer still has a pulse. Imagine if Sega marketed the game to its core audience rather than children; Sonic might actually break back into the big time. In other "there's-hope-yet news," EA's Dead Space is approaching the half-million mark and Little Big Planet is hovering at around 400,000.

Reality Check/Not-so-good news

Wii Fit sold another 697,000 copies in November, and Wii Play has now out-sold everything but the clothes on our backs, while Mirror's Edge sold a disappointing 145,000 copies in its first 20 days on-sale. And if that's not enough to make your blood boil, the spectacular, critically acclaimed PS3 exclusive RPG Valkyria Chronicles sold a hard-to-swallow 33,000 copies in 26 days, placing the Japanese RPG on the endangered species list. Meanwhile 600,000 PS3 users showed up to play war Call of Duty style—again, so expect another few years of guided floating torso FPSs. But it gets worse… Two of the year's brightest stars in the Wii galaxy didn't fare nearly as well as they deserved. The much beloved No More Heroes—a veritable brand to be reckoned with—has sold only 187,000 copies to date, and the meticulously hand-drawn and animated side-scrolling cartoon Wario Land Shake It could only muster 87,000 Wii users to take the 2D plunge. The vast majority of Nintendo's loyal-to-a-fault core has officially moved on. Too bad Microsoft and Rare decided to head them off at the pass with a "casual" Banjo-Kazooie sequel that sputtered its way onto store shelves selling only 65,000 copies in November. In contrast Kameo sold nearly a million copies when Microsoft had less than a third of the installed base.

Now get this

Last year Sony sold 375,000 copies of Heavenly Sword, with roughly half the current installed base, yet there hasn't been so much as a whisper on a potential sequel…What happened to the Sony that birthed genres and single-handedly reawakened gaming's spirit? Why raise the bar on realistic in-engine cinematics and processing muscle only to walk away from the best thing to happen to heroines since Lara Croft? Color us baffled. And if Sly and Jak are retired, why not fill their shoes? Come back Sony! We need you!

Hardware Sales for November 2008

The Wii and DS dominated in November while the Xbox 360 sold more than 2-to-1 versus PS3. Meanwhile the PSP continues to exceed expectations…with no games!

Wii 2.04million
[redacted]
PS3 378k
PS2 206k
Nintendo DS 1.57 Million
PSP 421k

Top 10 Selling Games for November 2008

We expected Gears 2 would occupy the top spot but where's Tomb Raider Underworld? …No Mirror's Edge either. As for Banjo-Kazooie Nuts & Bolts, if its 65k debut doesn't prove to Microsoft and Rare that games like Kameo are what gamers want, nothing ever will.

01	Gears of War 2	Microsoft	Xbox 360	1.56million
02	Call of Duty: World at War	Activision	Xbox 360	1.41million
03	Wii Play w/remote	Nintendo	Wii	796k
04	Wii Fit	Nintendo	Wii	697k
05	Mario Kart	Nintendo	Wii	637k
06	Call of Duty: World at War	Activision	PS3	597k
07	Guitar Hero World Tour	Activision	Wii	475k
08	Left 4 Dead	EA	Xbox 360	410k
09	Resistance 2	SCEA	PS3	385k
10	Wii Music	Nintendo	Wii	297k

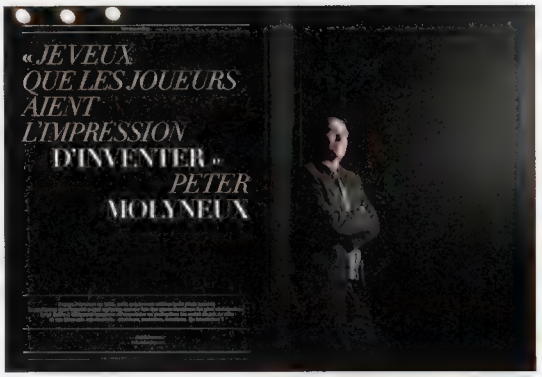
Gaming Culture

Modern Amusement

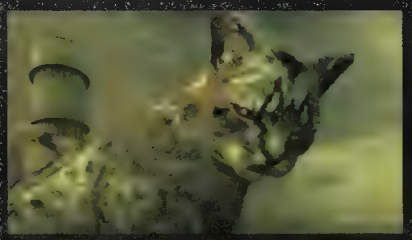
Pick up a copy of Amusement, and you might think you're looking at a fashion magazine. But the Paris-born rag is actually about videogames—in its own words, as it says in the title, "videogames, interaction, style, and inspiration."

"Amusement is the first lifestyle magazine on interactive entertainment," editor-in-chief Abdel Bounane told Japanese website PingMag in an interview. "We work with photographers and illustrators, creative people who usually work for magazines with a strong emphasis on images—fashion, photo, or design magazines—which has never been done before for a technology magazine." The first few issues have included everything from creative photo spreads and fashion, to interviews with the likes of the assistant to Ralph Baer, the man who invented the first videogame console.

Reluctant to call it a "videogame magazine," per se, Bounane wants to use videogames in the same way women's magazines use fashion: as an angle to explore a wider lifestyle, and as an incentive for advertisers. Right now it's only available in France (and in French), but will be available in the US (and in English) in 2009. Check out Amusement.fr for more—the issues are online for your perusal, or collectors/bathroom readers can order their own printed copies.



AMUSEMENT
JAPON & OFF
DOUJIN GAMES, AKIHABARA, SONY STYLE, SURVIVAL GUIDE
OUTSIDE, GAMING, PONG, ORIGINS, PAYAVEL, PACMAN FIGHT!



Shadows of the PlayStation 3

A group of young developers in Poland who call themselves Plastic have put together something a little bit different. As part of the European "demoscene"—a computer art subculture that specializes in producing non-interactive audio-visual artwork—the group had built a reputation for high-quality work, and was approached earlier this year by Sony with some PS3 dev kits.

The result of the collaboration is Linger in Shadows, a piece of interactive art that's different from anything you've ever seen on a game console. Instructions are limited to simple icons: you figure out what you're doing by just doing it. The piece offers two modes: Linger, the interactive mode, and Watch, in which the demo plays out for you with no interaction necessary.

For a peek into the future of interactive art, check it out it on the Playstation Store Dashboard for just three bucks. And for more on the work of Plastic, head over to... http://www.plastic-demo.org/.

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Block 002:
I Left My Heart in San Francisco

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

> "...they are not so much about expressing ideas as they are about instant gratification."

The first time you visit someone's place, what do you do? You spend your whole visit pretending you're not eying her stuff. You study the way she's arranged it, as if it will lend you new insight into who she is. For well and ill, our worlds both reflect and inform who we are, making our environments unconscious extensions of our minds. So the Goldfrapp is promising, you tell yourself, but what's with all the doilies?

A "world" as I'm defining it consists of both geography and culture. You've got your physical surroundings (your house, your friends, your possessions), and then you have the potential that they represent—the rules that you project onto or absorb from them. Yet a world is not a literal space and the literal physical or social laws that apply, so much as the relationships that you perceive between these elements. It's like the difference between a brain and a mind.

You know how sometimes city blocks shift around when you're not paying attention, or Queen tapes seem to materialize in the glovebox? The way you just know the phone will ring the moment you sit on the toilet, or how you need to leave the apartment to get any writing done? None of this you will read in a science journal, but as far as you're concerned this is how the world works. And everyone's world is different.

So what happens when two worlds overlap? Well, it depends on their rules of engagement. When you're a kid, there are good guys and bad guys, and physics are Newtonian. It's all very objective and logical. Then as you grow up, the epiphanies start to hit, and your world starts to quake. You're aghast. If your world isn't absolutely true, then what is? You cling to one idea after another, until they all grind together enough to smooth off the edges. You realize they are all true to a point, and the question becomes less of a mandate and more of relevance and priority in any given situation.

Romance is one of the first big epiphanies. It's when with all sincerity you place someone else's world above your own, to the point of adopting it. One moment you realize that the world may not center on you, then before you know it you're falling headlong into orbit around your new sun. Everything in your own world —rules and objects alike— you now interpret in terms of your new focal point, rather than yourself. Love is what you get on the other side of the journey; it's when you come to reconcile this new world with your own, warts and all. In this way you expand your world, and thereby become more of a person.

In principle a romantic relationship can develop wherever two worlds meet: between two people, or a person and a place (L.A. woman, Sunday afternoon / Drive through your suburbs / Into your blues), or a person and an especially vivid artwork. This is kind of where religion fits in as well. Yet the relationship between a videogame and its player is inherently romantic.

We've talked about how videogames are a study of cause and effect: you act, the game responds, you react to the new situation you have in part created. Meaning is conveyed. The whole idea is to explore the ramifications of behavior within the boundaries of the world handed to you. Unlike other media, which can only describe a world, a videogame invites the player to personally come to terms with an alien set of values.

Therefore in playing a videogame, you are in principle seeing through another person's eyes, both in form (the video) and in function (the game). What makes this scenario romantic is the willful innocence that both you and the game designer try to maintain in your exploration. When you put yourself at the center of this new world and throw yourself at its new challenges, what you're doing is subsuming your "real-world" justification in favor of a new system of understanding. You know that you need to pee, but first you've got to kill this boss. Why can't you kick open this door? Because that's not how the game works, duh.

Where game design may fail is where it betrays an inconsistency in its world as presented that is difficult for the player to reconcile. Perhaps the level design fails to anticipate the player's decisions. Perhaps the player can arbitrarily climb on some rocks, but not others. As these inconsistencies get in the player's way, frustration builds up. Frustration gives way to annoyance, then dismissal. "This may be fun," the player will on some level conclude, "but it is a lie." Therefore there is no worthwhile meaning to uncover, and what is the point of perpetuating the lie? The player retreats to a conservative mode, and the relationship breaks down.

Meanwhile, a successful design preserves the illusion that the player is always in control, even as the game slowly manipulates the player's way of thinking toward its own social constructs. If the game does its job, the player will never notice his domestication—and when he stops playing, new, previously unseen avenues will start to present themselves in his own world. Through these roads, other perspectives become that more accessible, and the player becomes that much larger a person. That is to say, a successful romance leads to love.

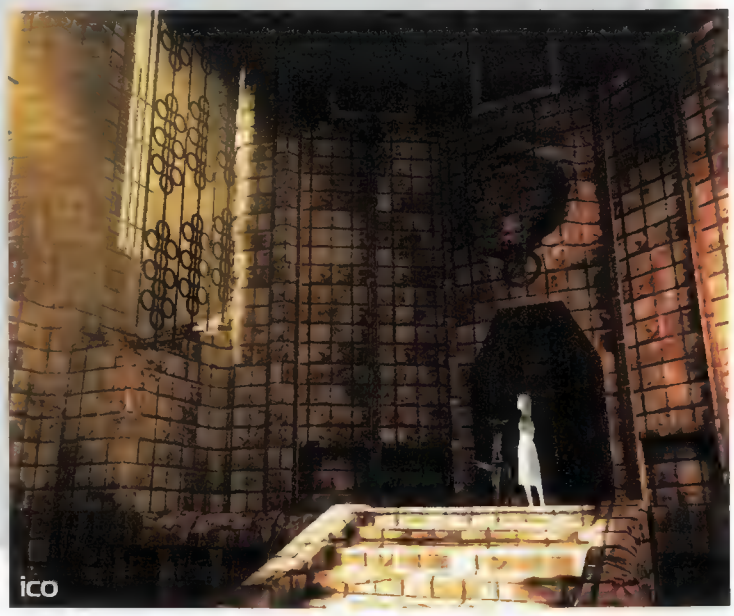
This here should be the goal of all communication, especially contained works of intent—novels, paintings, film. Yet again through their romanticism not merely in content but in action, videogames present an unprecedented opportunity to foster mutual understanding between people—and since the best of us is so far from enlightenment, it would be criminal to ignore this potential.

The task then is for videogames themselves, in theme and substance, to rise to the promise of the form and speak to the standard that they carry. Because right now, frankly, they're not cutting it. Though videogames may be romantic, they are romancing the children in all of us. That is to say, they are not so much about expressing ideas as they are about instant gratification.

There is a place for that, but we've been doing this for forty years now. It's an exploitative relationship, and it has stunted everyone involved. For all the time and resources that videogames take from us, we deserve far better. And for all the heights that videogames can reach, so do they.

The problem is a tricky one to tackle, in part because all of the elements form a vicious cycle. The grammar is stuck in a rut, which limits what can really be done thematically. The culture that has grown up around the medium has come to fetishize the status quo, alienating anyone who doesn't share the same religion. Around and around, as the rut turns into Scrooge McDuck's worry room.

Still. Adult, or at least adolescent, romance shouldn't be that hard—should it? It's all about making mistakes, and hey, so are videogames! It's about as basic as you get, in life as in most human expression. We just have to take it step by step, and untangle the problem as well as we can.



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System: Xbox 360, PS3 | **Developer:** SURGE | **Publisher:** SURGE | 1 Player | **ESRB:** M | **Available:** January 27

Afro Samurai

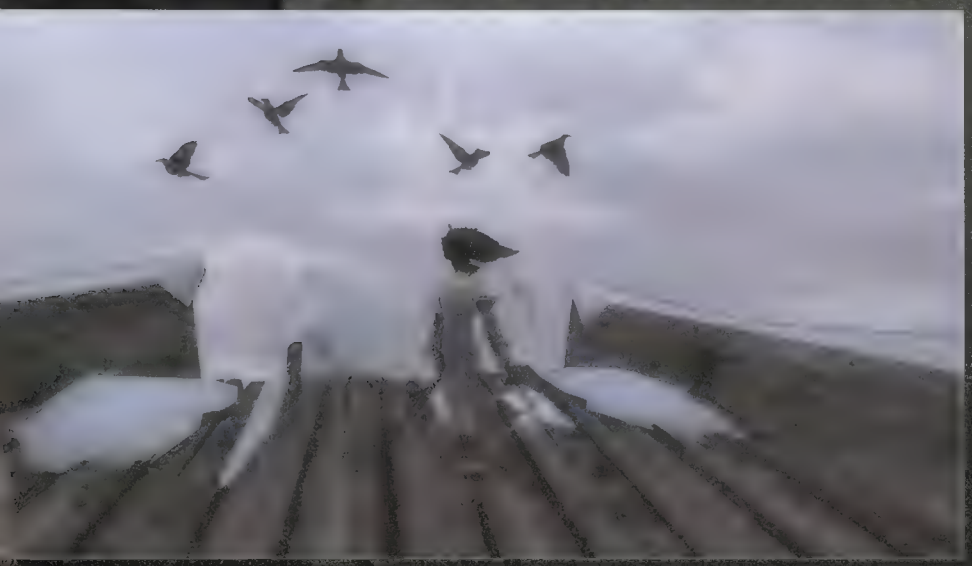
Who says there's no Justice in the world?

words Dave Halverson

In legend story that only the bravest would wear the Number 2 headband has the right to challenge the Number One for the sacred power he possesses. That Number One used to be Afro Samurai's father right up until a man named Justice chopped off his head and became a god. Now Afro wears the Number 2 and seeks Number One—not for power but revenge…

For a doujinshi manga to become an animated TV series in Japan isn't uncommon, but to do so in the manner of Takashi Okazaki's Afro Samurai, picking up Studio Gonzo and Samuel L. Jackson by pure [illegible] along the way, can only be viewed as fate. Even as popular and renowned as Afro Samurai has become throughout the UK, Japan, Australia, and America, the road from five part anime mini-series to 7th generation video game is paved with peril. Not so much in getting a game like Afro Samurai made but in getting it made right. Because when it comes to anything as almighty as Afro Samurai, it's better to leave well-enough alone than risk sullying something so profound and beloved. The mere idea of running Afro Samurai through traditional licensing channels would petrify most, which is why Afro Samurai probably would have never been made if David Robinson hadn't stumbled upon it as randomly as Gonzo and Sam Jackson did. As soon as David saw the pilot—which I'm betting was probably the same one Sam Jackson happened to come by—adapting Afro Samurai into a video game *religiously* became his mission which given the subject matter seems about as likely as Uwe Boll landing the live-action film rights.

Like Takashi Okazaki and Sam Jackson, David loves hip-hop, anime, manga, culture, Kung-Fu and everything that goes with them and understands the difference between ham-fisted Mortal Kombat-style trips and the raw intensity that studios like Gonzo, Gainax and Production I.G. have fashioned into an art form like no other. All he had to do now was find a publisher to finance it and fill a studio with an international team of [illegible] less than a 110% from a group of gifted individuals all on the same page wasn't going to get Afro Samurai done the only way it could be; by throwing out convention and working solely from the animation itself. It took some doing, but eventually the stars aligned for Afro Samurai once again. Sitting down with the newly formed team late in '07 as they [illegible] a lot like all my visits to Shiny Entertainment in the early 90's as David, Mike, Doug, Nick and Nick were piecing together Earthworm Jim in a similar fashion, based on a singular vision by the seat of their pants. A year later with the follow-up anime *Afro Samurai: Resurrection* about to hit stores, and a live-action Hollywood film in the works (with all the usual suspects attached) I'm ecstatic to report that the results are much the same. Like EWJ all those years ago, Afro Samurai is like no other game before it. Not only does it live up to the series' standards, it sets its own.



Like a shot of WD-40 into the frozen cogs of an industry that's been afraid of its own shadow for far too long, Afro Samurai is a Godzilla breath of fresh air. The standard by which licensed media should be adapted to video games by grown ups for grown ups has finally, once and for all, been set. That said, I seriously doubt that it will ever happen again. The tired framework that's plagued nearly every worthwhile movie license—no matter how grandiose or well-made—doesn't apply to Afro Samurai. Where most studios sandwich movie-inspired levels of gameplay between cinematic book ends (often of contrasting styles), creating a jarring disconnect, SURGE has made the actual events of the miniseries the bookends and fleshed out the world of Afro Samurai in between, building on the Feudal Japan meets the Matrix foundation that Okazaki and Gonzo so eloquently provided. Mere set dressing on its own, like a stage without actors, from there SURGE builds the game in much the same way directors like Oliver Stone and Quentin Tarantino edit their films, with frequent flashbacks and means-to-an-end scenes that draw you into the story in such a way that you never know what lies ahead. The cinematography follows suit fusing neo-classic Kung Fu theatre and high production values in a way that's never been done while drawing bigger-than-life performances from their polygonal cast. Everything in Afro Samurai happens in the game; not as if you're watching a movie in which you're the star. And there are no life bars, gauges or gimmicks to be found...no lemonade power-up or lame "system" in sight. The only life giving elements are lonely little Otsuru teddy bears that echo her childlike giggle—grim reminders of the tragedy that's unfurling—and the action itself is as explosive and raw as Afro's

rage. There isn't a single mechanical element to distract you from the only things that matter: the story, the action and the music that drives it.

From the moment the game begins you know you're not in Kansas anymore and that you never want to go back. Set to a pulsating, energetic soundtrack after-hour Ninja Ninja enters stage left and the fourth dimension comes into the narrative with manic intensity and sonic cool from the screen, pulling from a score that sounds like nothing you've ever heard in a video game. Not for the faint-of-heart or sexual innuendo alone, but from hearing that master English sound as musical fuel was...

SURGE also knows the significance of a great voice-over cast. The kind of cast that can provide the actors and actress a voice. The RZA line-and-soundtrack in Afro Samurai is the best I've heard since Symphony of the Night and should be a CAUD movie up call to an industry that's long forgotten what a voice can play in a game. Every facet of this game oozes with style. The opening credits come into existence framed within game files out of the water and onto the shore to dry up and die. Even the loading screens are cool. For what little there is they're so apropos they seem like an element of the game.

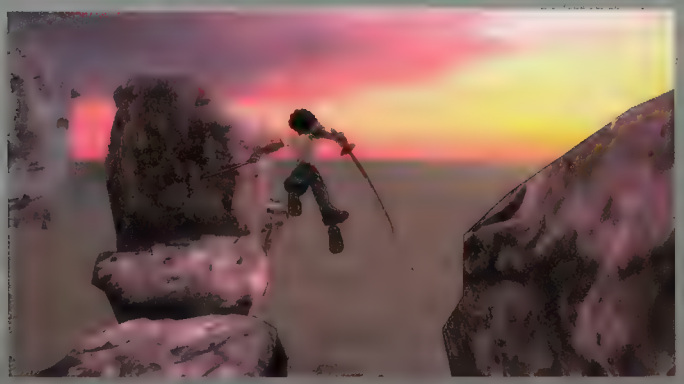
Stepping into the visuals the same dedication and craftsmanship appears. As good as the game looks in screenshots and footage, never compares to seeing it in motion on a big HD display. There's no blurry game that I know, off the technological SURGE has to make the game look like a living, breathing thing but it looks like there should be. The organic outdoors promises a bump and shown (unlike anything I've seen that's hard to describe and the little touches of dust and debris throughout, even with where they don't need, simply should not exist in a game that was by a team this size created with on a budget this size. Afro himself is completely dynamic to the terrain and his afro and mechanical mouse is perfect and only adds to every scene. Frames of clean, crisp hand-off notes, snowy flurries dust and debris, clothing and bling flutter and shine, and the skylines have that soft blurred look that can trick you dead in your tracks. Every surface has something special to say, just like the characters themselves. From the swirling monologue of The Daimyo to the slithering evil of Ron Perlman's Justice, polygonal characters have never seemed more alive. Anyone who's seen the series will be in complete awe of how amazingly well SURGE have brought the tone of the anime to life. If you thought the Empty Seven were odd before, wait until you see some of their attacks.

The gameplay in Afro Samurai is rooted in epic combat scenarios linked by adventure/platforming elements not unlike those found in Tomb Raider, only completely re-jiggered for the Afro Samurai mythos. I was hoping for a decent-size, tight, gratifying action-game and got a grand-scale anime opus set within massive versions from every chapter in the series that look more built than modelled. Forests, quaint villages, breathtaking mountain passes, fortresses carved into the earth and areas that you'll just have to see for yourself all project an aura of authenticity. The combat is, as expected, finely tuned and wicked to the core, divided between light and heavy slicing attacks, special "Father's Legacy" attacks earned by collecting Mementos (watch for the eerie manifestation), sweeping and high kicks, and In-Focus maneuvers that send your opponents appendages flying. By focusing his thoughts (holding LT) everything around Afro goes black and white (and red all over) and appears to move in slow-motion

"Afro Samurai is like no other game before it. Not only does it live up to the series' standards, it sets its own."

rendering the enemy vulnerable to Afro's clean horizontal and vertical slashing attacks. If only it were that simple. Outside of the Empty Seven's expendable clones, Afro's enemies generally don't take well to being hacked into bite-sized pieces. The AI is more than up to the task at hand as the game and Afro evolves. That doesn't stop Ninja Ninja from taunting you with a little Body Part Poker though. Three of a kind earns Afro a new skill—I'll leave the rest to you. Strategic blocking is also a must in order to stun an enemy just enough for one of three pouncing moves or finishers, and when the Focus gauge is full (Afro's pendant will glimmer white) Afro can launch into OverFocus—a permanent state of In-Focus where the blood and body parts fly freely. Focus moves can also be used to reflect and slice bullets. None of these will save you from the game's patterned-based boss fights but you'll need them otherwise. Fighting well and mastering techniques to level Afro up is paramount to getting anywhere near the No. 1 Headband. Speaking of which, I wish there were a way for everybody who will play Afro Samurai to see the animation beforehand. So much of what SURGE accomplishes here ties into Jinno, Sword Master, Okiku and Ninja Ninja; basically all the family Afro has ever known. At one point the game took me from such a gameplay high to an emotional low I got a feeling in the pit of my stomach I didn't recognize at first. It's been so long since I felt this kind of exhilaration I'd forgotten what it was like. The last time I felt this rapturous was playing Symphony of the Night >

Do Afro-droids dream of electric sheath's?

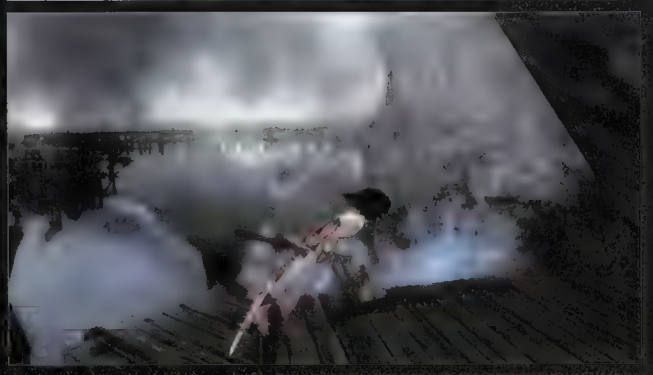


me I saw Alucard, and later when the Castle turned upside down ed all those new corridors (just as I was facing the horror of oing back to the lifeforce-sucking 3D of the time). I didn't realize how desensitized I'd become since. I guess at some point along the way you tell yourself that those old butterflies fluttered because gaming was so new… but it wasn't just that. It was the way developers were constantly pushing the envelope of new ideas. Eventually, the benchmarks just stopped coming and anyone who's been around long enough to care has adapted. The next-generation version of that euphoric feeling is pretty intense. Now I know how Neo felt the first time he jumped down Agent Smith's throat.

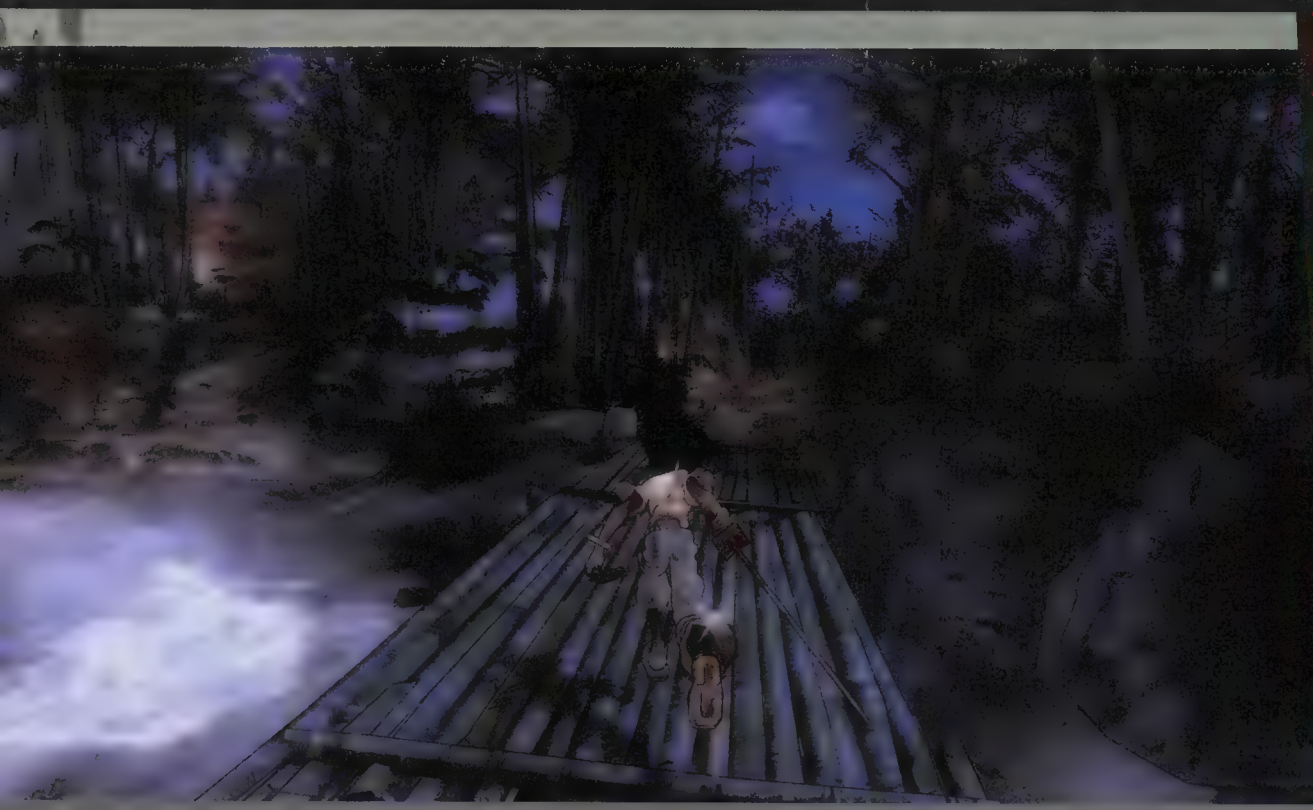
Afro Samurai fans are going to LOVE this game, but it will be interesting to see how the rest of the world reacts when they walk into a room full of naked tattooed female assassins, or level up for chopping off three body parts in row. Not to mention the dark side of Ron Perlman, whose Justice makes Hellboy look like Pikachu and Sam Jackson as a shit-talking force of nature. Kelly Wu is intoxicating too, although the team decided against her and Afro's sex scene (I wish they would have called me). One thing nobody can say is that Afro Samurai is short. I didn't keep track, and I took my time soaking it all in, but the No. 2 Headband (normal) mode was an at least 13-15-hour haul. I just started on Headband No. 1—all skills carried over thank you very much—and I've never been so happy to see those teddy bears.

parting shot

SURGE has done the implausible and created a benchmark action and adventure-soaked video game that plays like an R-rated movie with smoking, nudity, extreme violence, and a truly memorable cinematic score. The only difference? You get to play while you watch. No number or letter can define how special a game Afro is.



Afro can do just about anything with a sword if he puts his mind to it.



An interview with SURGE

play: It's been a year since we sat down for the first-look cover story. What's the journey been like? How have you grown as a unit?
Paul Gardner: Time has gone by too fast; it doesn't feel like that long since you last came by our office. The team grew significantly relatively late in production and that has forced some changes in the way we had been working. We've all had to learn to delegate, and it was difficult to give things up at first. But our Art Director put together a really talented team. In a lot of ways it's become easier. Communication is pretty telepathic at this stage—we're tending to independently come to similar design solutions to any problems that come up. There's less ambiguity about what we're trying to achieve and that makes it easier for everybody to see how all these separate elements are going to fall into place.

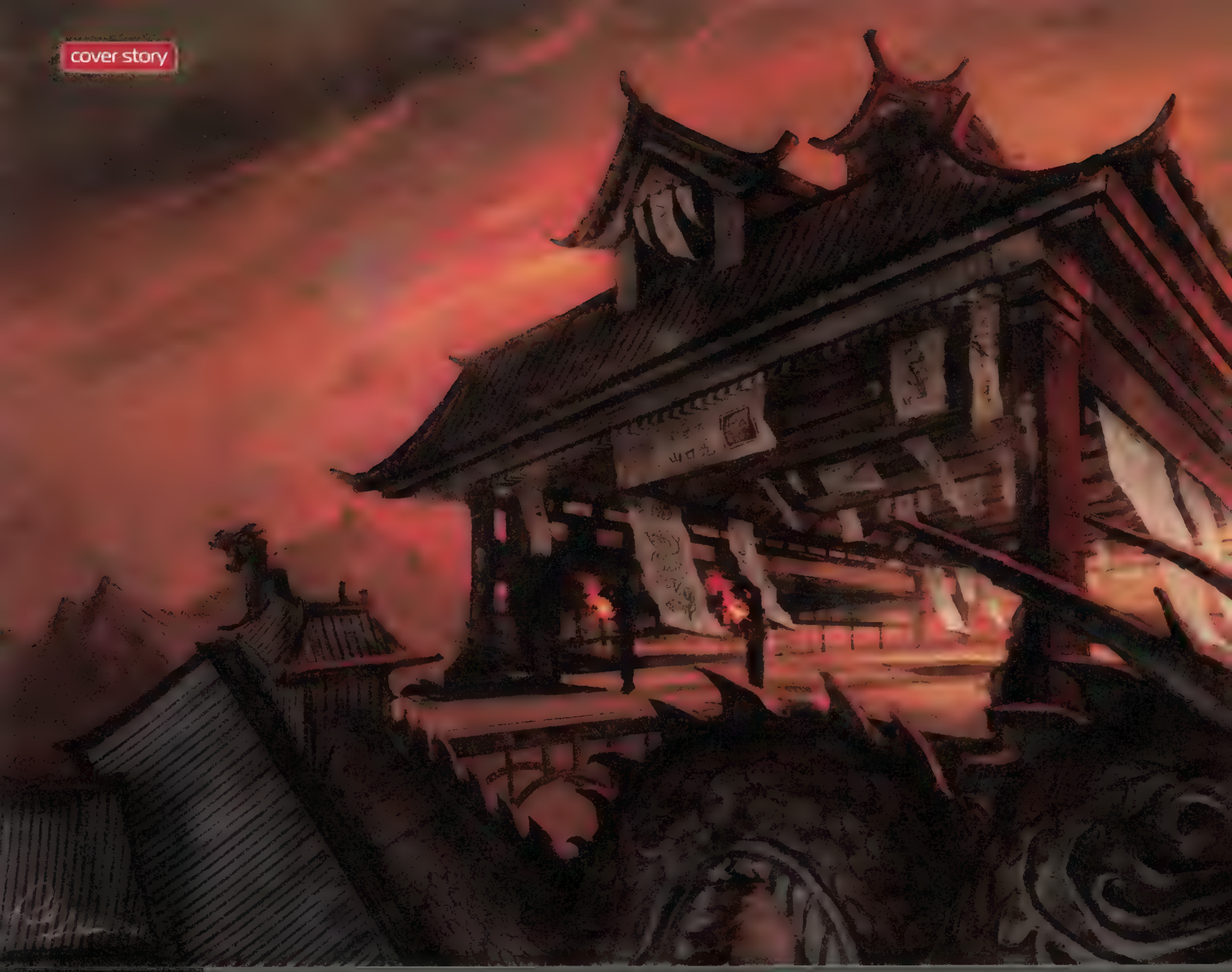
I knew then by sheer personnel alone that Afro Samurai was going to be a great game, especially by adaptation standards given everyone's enthusiasm and love and understanding of the anime. But given the team's size and the schedule I never imagined you would produce a game that in my opinion epitomizes everything a modern game should be, while reintroducing a lot of the heart gaming lost along the way to becoming this big politically correct cookie cutter industry. How have you managed to produce a game of this magnitude—your first as a SURGE studio—inside of two years? You were doing a lot of outsourcing with background elements and set pieces. Did that play a role in delivering this level of quality in a relatively small window?
Paul Gardner: Outsourcing was a big factor, and we were fortunate to find two good studios in Tose and Igloo. But I think more important was the planning and preparation done during our pre-production phase.
We worked as a very small team of eight for five months creating our first prototype and in that time defined a lot of what the game eventually would become. For me, the scope of the game was pretty defined and set during those first four months of the project. It's a lot easier to start working a concept into more detail when the foundations, the story and game mechanics are not in flux. When things didn't go so smoothly, it was often as a result of us diverging from our original plan. I hope for future projects we can resolve more of these issues during pre-production.

Right from the start, even the opening credits are gripping along with Samuel Jackson's pitch-perfect monologue on the heart of the Afro nexus. From there the game opens with a few choice words from Ninja-Ninja and a thunderous hip-hop overture that launches the best soundtrack since Castlevania Symphony of the Night. Somebody understands (remembers) how music can elevate a game. It say's "inspired by RZA". So who's better than RZA? Because I don't know if Mr. Diggs could have pulled this much emotion out of a video game, even this one, through music. From the heavy beats to the amazing Afro theme and somber tone of Kuma's story, this is probably the best video game soundtrack ever produced.
Paul Gardner: We first met with The RZA at GDH's offices in Los Angeles last year. He already had commitments that meant that he couldn't score the game himself, but he gave us a lot of his time to talk through the project. He explained the philosophy he applied for the anime score and discussed what kind of approach he would take with music for the game and the kind of people we should be looking for to collaborate with. The RZA himself contributed two original tracks.
We found three composers, who collaborated to create the rest of the soundtrack. Most of the beats and lyrics were created by Bridgeside Productions, a collective out of Oakland. They're young and hugely talented. Their creativity was supported by producer Danny Fouché, whom David has known for years. He mixed new arrangements of Bridgeside's tracks to create a score that supported the atmosphere of the game.
Through The RZA we were introduced to composer and musical arranger Howard Drossin, who had collaborated with The RZA on a couple of movie scores and has his trust and respect. His tracks encompass the rock element of The RZA's philosophy, evoking the epic spirit of the spaghetti western. Howard actually began his career in videogames scoring for SEGA, so his experience was important for us.

Ninja-Ninja is by all counts the funniest, coolest most awesome-est narrator EVER. How on Earth did you get this performance out of Sam Jackson? I mean, I know the man is super-cool, but it's spoken with a vigor we haven't heard since Pulp Fiction. Either he LOVES this project or you held him at gunpoint.

"It's a lot easier to start working a concept into more detail when the foundations, the story and game mechanics are not in flux."

Paul Gardner, **Design Director**



The scene of The Daimyo's last stand. Heed his words carefully.

Paul Gardner: It was at gunpoint. At the same time it was obvious from the beginning of the session that Samuel Jackson wasn't just turning up to collect his paycheck. There was a lot to do, around three hundred pages, and maybe that goes some way to explaining the energy in the performance. He blew through the script fast, giving this incredible performance, constantly inventive, playful and deep.

The first season of the anime lasts around two and a half hours, while the game must be around four to five times as long. As a result the player is spending a lot more time in the company of Ninja Ninja and Afro. So we tried to write something that revealed other aspects to their personalities. Okazaki-san compared Ninja Ninja to the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland—an enigmatic character whose motives are ambiguous, at turns beguiling, charming, threatening, and giving advice that perhaps is only going to lead to trouble. He should embody all of the emotions Afro has suppressed—his regrets, self-doubt and self-loathing, as well as his wit.

Samuel Jackson implicitly understood this and that's very much evident in his performance. He was everything you'd hope Samuel Jackson would be. Cool, smart, gracious and very much part of the team

Our voice director for the project was Mary Elizabeth McGlynn and she ran these sessions. She's also a voice actor and performed a lot of the taunts and cries for Afro's female assassins. Anime fans will probably recognize her name. She has a great ability to find the right way to put the performers at ease and clearly communicate ideas. The one time she wasn't in the control room the whole thing slid into chaos. It was like a ship sinking. It made me appreciate what she does and how effortlessly she does it.Mary Elizabeth and Samuel established a great rapport, and I'd learnt by then it's best just to shut up and listen.

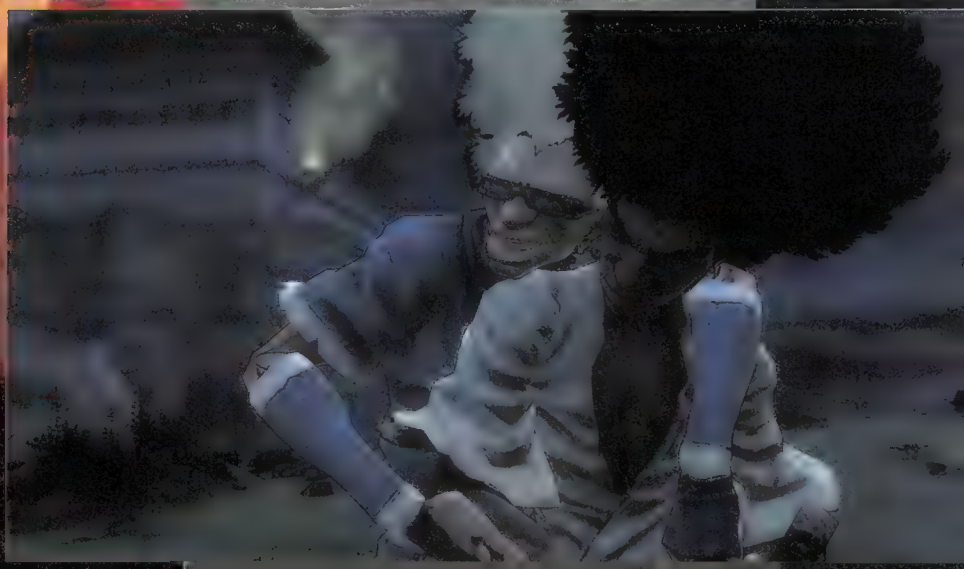
The dialogue throughout is excellent—every role in every chapter is utterly captivating. Who wrote this script?

Paul Gardner: Hey that was me; thank you. It's one of the most challenging things I've ever done, and knowing that Samuel Jackson is going to be reading it is pretty good motivation not to f**k up. This was my third script for a videogame, but the first for a mature title, so I'm grateful that David and the team trusted me with it.

The whole concept of Afro is so powerful, and that's to Okazaki-san and Gonzo's credit. It encompasses a lot of universal themes, of love, responsibility, revenge and redemption. It was all already there; I just tried to find ways to draw it all out.

We've tried to tell Afro's story through or during gameplay as much as possible, and to keep cinematics under one minute in length, to keep the game moving.

I've been fortunate that the design team have been really passionate about the story, so I've had the opportunity to discuss and refine the themes, the characters' motivations and their place in the larger story with designers who understand how important the story is to player motivation. I'm especially indebted to Caso Santiago and Seth Carus. Generally people seem to like it, so I'm happy.



"Samuel Jackson...was everything you'd hope Samuel Jackson would be. Cool, smart, gracious and very much part of the team."

Paul Gardner, **Design Director**

And nobody belts out four letter words and diabolical dialogue better than Ron Pearlman. Was he just totally going for broke?
Paul Gardner: Ron Perlman gave a very smart reading of Justice. Although he looks monstrous, Justice is quite charming, his words are almost beguiling, and enough that over time his twisted rationale for his actions begin to make some sense. So Ron Perlman did a really interesting thing—when he could go big with the performance he'd instead suppress his voice, so you'd be forced to hang on his words, and gradually be drawn in.

The Daimyo's performance together with the lines themselves and the lip sync really set the tone. Who plays the Daimyo?
Paul Gardner: The studio sent eight audition tracks for the Daimyo, and there were a couple of well-known actors among them. But one stood out as the perfect voice. His name is Morgan Sheppard and he's a veteran of the Royal Shakespeare Company.
He was part of the first RSC tour of Japan, and he later worked in theatre there, so he has some experience of the period and setting. He told us a story about an evening spent drinking with Toshirō Mifune (the lead in Kurosawa's Yojimbo) in Tokyo. Then we discovered that his son is part of the cast of Battlestar Galactica and all work stopped for ten minutes as they tried to get gossip out of him about the final season.
At the audition, with almost no information about the Daimyo, Morgan had intuitively found the right voice for him, weary, authoritative and full of insinuation.

On the day of recording we discussed the character just before the recording session—his temperament and motivation and... and I actually think it was unnecessary. When writing for the character that aspect is important to me, since it informs the words that are chosen, but for the actors it's perhaps too much information. By that stage it all should be implicit in the script, for the director and performer to draw out and respond to. Their honest first response to the script was almost always the right one.

Any chance all of this ADR might appear in a making-of vignette? Maybe a Special Edition?
Paul Gardner: There's a lot of dialog recorded that didn't make it into the game, covering Afro's backstory and the relationship between Afro, Jinno and Otsuru. I'd like to see that released in some format.

When I walked into the round room in The Daimyo's story Part 2 and

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"We really wanted the look to feel hand crafted, we tried to get as much hand painted textures into the world as possible"

Bryan Johnston, Lead Artist

This Spread: From concept to game, one of the most exhilerating moments in recent gaming history.

was attacked by four topless assassins I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore. Someone finally put the "M" in M-Rated by treating me like an adult not an over 18 delinquent. Did you consider Afro "tapping that ass" in Okiku's story? Ninja-Ninja sure wanted to see it.
Paul Gardner: There wasn't a love scene in the original draft of the script; it was implied through Okiku and Ninja Ninja's words. I felt that the relationship between Afro and Okiku, the sense that they are drawing closer to each other, could be expressed without it. But there was a very strong response from within the team that we needed these two characters to be seen to be involved intimately so we devised what I felt was a pretty subtle and elegant scene. But within the studio there was a lot of anxiety around what the ESRB's response would be, and in the end the best solution was to return to the original script.
Ultimately we worked hard to expand her role, to try and make Okiku a character with more substance, and to explain why she and Afro are drawn to each other.

I didn't foresee the gameplay being so diverse. I knew the combat would be fierce (and is it ever…) but I didn't expect such expansive locations and adventure-based gameplay. It really plays out like you're living through Afro Samurai (through Ninja-Ninja) playing out all the in-between stuff animators can't put up on screen.
Alex Omlansky (Lead Animator): It's funny you mention that, because there were a lot of times in the anime where I was like "damn, I know something badass just happened!" but you don't actually see it. Gonzo does a lot of elegant, artistic things so they don't have to animate everything. An example is in the first big fight scene where Afro halves a dude straight up the middle—you just see a flash and a white, vertical line and your brain fills in the rest. Or when Afro enters the Empty Seven temple, and you see the hundreds of Android bodies and all the purple blood up the walkway—you know he just did some crazy samurai shit, but you don't get to see it all the time. It's a testament to how clever the Gonzo guys are—they probably had a crazy timeline and couldn't do every last thing they wanted to do. That's where it's so cool that we can give the fans of the anime the chance to fill in the gaps. Didn't get to see enough purple Android-juice in the anime? No problem, we got your purple Android-juice right here. Lots of it too. The Androids were a ton of fun to bring to life. You'll notice we were given the freedom to redesign them a little too. They look pretty effing sweet.

The terrain around Okiku's house—the way it wound through the river bed was so amazing… and from there things just get better and better. The topography has a natural craggy feel to it, like the world does, not like some uber-fabricated game world. Was this intentional?
Paul Gardner: We wanted Okiku's valley to feel like a real place, and a place that Okiku could live in. Having said that I think in hindsight the same effect could have been achieved without the terrain being quite as craggy as it is. The engineer who had to debug the collision code and the designers working in the level probably feel the same.

The textures are like nothing I've ever seen. The rock faces in The Lowdown East Pass for instance…what is this technique?
Bryan Johnston (Lead Artist): We really wanted the look to feel hand crafted, we tried to get as much hand painted textures into the world as possible. But I think the world really come alive when you add the lighting. Before this stage, the East Pass felt pretty monochromatic. Hakjoon Lee, our one and only lighting artist, did an amazing job of bringing out the mood of a scene through the lighting.

On to the models, especially Afro's: How are you achieving the hand-drawn and shaded 3D look? The end result is astounding, especially given the state of the way clothing appears and animates.
Bryan Johnston: It was a real collaboration between art and engineering. We knew we didn't want a traditional cel-shaded look, but something that looked more like an illustration. It was a lot of trial and error. Danny Chan, our lead programmer, set up a shader that gave the artist the ability to define the way the light and shadow interacts with the surface. That gave us the kind of iterative power we needed to really tune the look of the characters, we were tweaking it all the way up to the end. But it's the details that really add up to something special and Afro is a perfect example of that. He is the most dynamic character I have ever worked

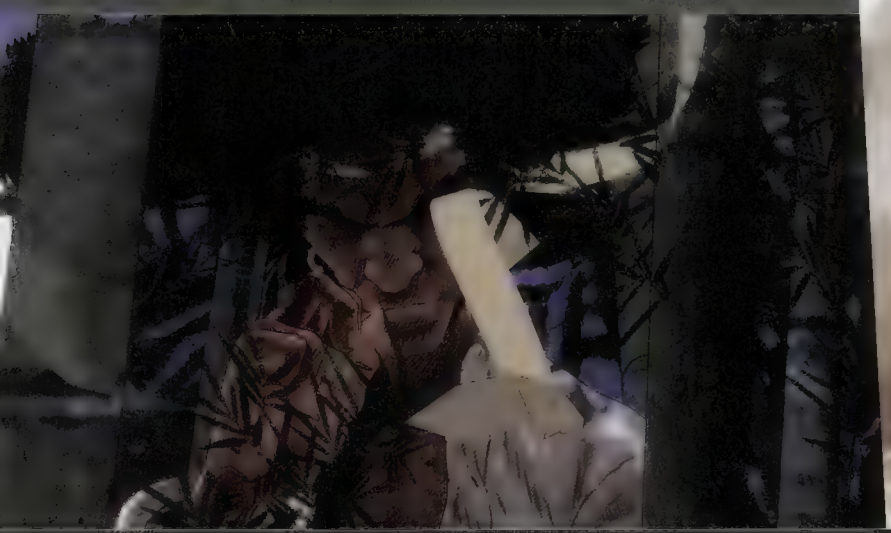
with, his hair, his headband, sleeves, pants, medallion, smoke, bracelets, all those elements moving dynamically in real time, it's crazy—it really adds an incredible richness to him.

I expected the trade-off for all the seamless detail to be somewhat limited flexibility, however; Afro has dynamic collision beyond any I've seen. His feet match not only slopes but vertical elements as well as if he's tethered to the terrain. Is this something you planned and implemented from day one? Because it makes all the difference.
Paul Gardner: It was planned from day one, but implemented relatively late in production. There are a lot of other systems that we have planned to make the player character more responsive and dynamic that I hope will make it into some future game.

How about a round of Body Part Poker!? So when did this lovely bit of hacking come about? Was it planned from the beginning or did it just kind of happen?
Paul Gardner: Body Part Poker, that's all our Lead Designer Asahiko's work. He was looking for a mode that would showcase the dynamic cutting, and give some motive for playing with precision. I really liked the concept and felt that it highlights the cruel, mischievous side of Ninja Ninja's personality; he's entertaining himself playing with the lives of others. Between art and design the whole way in which the information is presented to the player, the cards and the burning cigarette as a timer, quickly developed. This was one example of what we were talking about earlier, the communication between departments becoming kind of telepathic.

Three-of-a-kind, of course, levels you up but I was leveling up throughout via my fighting prowess (I guess). What are the criteria for leveling up and how does it affect Afro?
Paul Guirao (Combat Lead): Leveling up is done by gaining Experience Points throughout the game. When the pendant glows red, that means you've earned experience points. Leveling up will do the following things:
Increase your hit points
Increase your focus point meter
Earn a new skill
When you level up, it's rather transparent because nothing shows up on the screen that tells you how much experience you just earned. Instead, go to the skill menu, you'll notice that there are moves to be unlocked. These are marked by a white brush stroke. The next thing you will notice is that there will be a move unlocked with a blue tint. This states that this will be the next move unlocked. Once the brush stroke is filled completely blue, Afro will level up and learn a new skill.

David, I know how passionate you are about Afro and how deep an understanding you have of his plight but it takes a village... The entire Kuma chapter hit me like a ton of bricks. You managed to take all of Jinno and Afro's pain and draw out a pivotal scene with emotion the anime couldn't, through music, dialogue and imagery. When the arc collapsed I couldn't believe my eyes as the chunks of wood and dust broke away and everything up to that moment—the way you orchestrate the segments of the fight—was sheer perfection. At one point the snow and mist is actually drawn into a hollow below Jinno.



"We also could not have done this without the fans. We've received letters of support, blogs, comments, we read all that stuff and it means a lot for gamers of all types to come to us and give us love."

Dewil Robinson, Producer

To the initiated this screen speaks volumes. Anime fan or not, you need to see Afro Samurai.

How does a team come together to create a scene like this?
David Robinson: It was a lot of back and forth. I think Kuma was redesigned like three times, as well as being the first full level we ever finished in the engine. It was always thought that Kuma had to have a ghostly, heavy-hearted feel. In the show, the dude practically cries his eyes out the entire fight. It's one of the most emotional and heart wrenching scenes in the series. Paul Gardner and Asaniko, our lead designers all had a hand in bringing it together, but mostly Paul. The monologue from Kuma is just really freakin' cool and I'm pretty proud of it. We are very, very close to it, but we never had enough time to tweak a few things.
Paul Gardner: The collapse of the Red Gate was actually a response to a design problem, at least at first. In the anime, the gate stands on a vast barren plain. Managing the player's progression through that kind of space and forcing the confrontation with Kuma is not so easy. Afro's only motive is revenge, and he'll always take the shortest path to reach his goal.
So we cut a rift through the plane in order to force Afro to climb the gate—that's the only way ahead. As the gate collapses, it bridges the rift and forms a natural arena for the final encounter. But with that as its foundation the collapse of the gate came to represent more; it became the conclusion of the second act of Kuma's story, representing his fall, and enabled us to reinforce through the event and through Ninja Ninja's monologue that this is not the anime.

I can't imagine anyone playing Afro having not seen the anime? The symbolism in the load screens (best load screens ever BTW) will be lost along with the bear… Is there any kind of cross promotion with FUNimation in the works?
Alex Omlansky: One thing cool was the FUNimation guys flew in and filmed a behind-the-scenes piece. I think it's going to be on the Afro Samurai: Resurrection Blu-ray disc. I sent them a bunch of animation footage, along with some raw, work-in-progress animation stuff that I think will be cool for fans to see. The FUNimation guys have been so supportive, and we've had easy access to them, which makes things so much easier for the cross promotion you are talking about. Between Gonzo, FUNimation and us here in the studio, it's been a very loving relationship. They really have our backs!

You chose to go with a single Z-Axis camera—does this have something to do with how you want players to view the game?
David Robinson: One of the most important things about our camera was that we wanted it to be cinematic. Players are trained to follow the camera without having to touch it, but most of the best views of our game come from the player finding just the right camera angle on the fly, you simply don't know when or where the enemies are going to be. Watching blood and parts fly into the screen is pretty awesome.
I was just dead set against fixed cameras though or having the camera follow the player snapping behind his back or using tank-style controls. We had to just hope the player would concentrate on the cool situations that cinematic views present

Going back to replay levels to collect Mementos, the measure of finesse within each set piece is more prominent than ever as you play past levels using new techniques. How sizeable is the payoff for collecting all five in every stage?
Paul Guirao: The payoff is rather huge. The unlockable moves are very powerful; they take off a huge chunk of hit points when performed properly. In some cases, they can instantly kill specific enemies. You can view them as cheap, if you like, but they add another dimension on destroying all your adversaries. They are very useful when fighting in the later levels when you're surrounded by a plethora of bad guys. The Perfect Air Slice and the Easy Make Combo are two mementos that come in very handy, especially if you decide to be brave and tackle The Number One difficulty setting (hard mode). The Easy Make Combo allows the player to short cut the tier combo system. You can now pull off some of the harder combos in fewer steps.
David Robinson: There are over a hundred moves in the game, and one of my favorite modes is the reflection mode, where you get to see all the moves you have, how they work, and when to use them. The reason was that many times players find themselves in the middle of a big fight, and don't remember the moves, and don't want to break the flow of the game by stopping to read the manual or go back to training mode. In Afro you just hit "Back" and see all the moves in real-time. Try it, get into a fight, jump into the air, hit back, and then see which moves you want to finish this punk-ass with. It's a butt-kicking simulator. That's what Afro is. The side-flipping, back flipping are my favorites. I have found myself side flipping out of an enemy's heavy attack more times than I can count.

Have you seen Afro 2? Sio… OMG, I can't imagine what you could do. Well, actually I can. Will you? Please? Please, please, please?
David Robinson: I have seen the latest Afro 2 and its pretty bad-ass. The first five minutes are simply amazing and anyone who sees it will want to have our game in their hands to dish out some pain as soon as possible. It's pretty intense.
Alex Omlansky: Again, being that we have such a great relationship with Gonzo and FUNimation, we are fortunate to have seen an early draft of the second anime. There are some really sweet characters and the action is better than the first.

In my opinion, the only other studio designing games on this level is Ubisoft Montreal so I hope you've earned the respect you deserve within Namco/Bandai. Because it's developers like you and games like this that make my gaming life worth living. I will forever press LT or L1 to finish my enemies in Afro's and your honor.
Alex Omlansky: Wow, that's very cool of you to say. Ubisoft Montreal is obviously one of the most talented, art-centric studios around. The new Prince of Persia looks tight! We did hear that some of the peeps there noticed our game at E3 or one of the other conferences and liked what we've done, so it felt good to hear that. The feelings are quite mutual. We're a pretty small, humble team, and any positive thing we read or hear, no matter how small, goes a long way with us. It's what keeps us wanting to constantly improve.
David Robinson: Hey man, the support that we've been getting from our company is awesome. I know there were times when stuff we did just was not working out and it looked like a long-shot. But to their credit, management here kept their heads and just kept us working. I think now all of the organization appreciated what a small group of Americans can do and the Project Soul and Tekken teams have shown us much love, especially recently loaning us programmers and people to help get this amazing game done. We also could not have done this without the fans. We've received letters of support, blogs, comments, we read all that stuff and it means a lot for gamers of all types to come to us and give us love. The future of gaming really is dependent on gamers investing in the small guys and our crazy ideas. We may not get it all right, but at least they have a voice with us.

Year in Review

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Dave Halverson
Publisher

The twilight's last gleaming or the dawn of a new era?

I DEMAND A RECOUNT!

Gaming hit the mainstream a long time ago, but I don't think anybody who's been around since Nintendo resuscitated the industry in the early 90s could have imagined it penetrating every facet of American life, peppering the entertainment spectrum with video game-theme shows, a high-profile cable network, substantial feature films from real directors, and cross promoting and licensing so vast that it now permeates the national psyche from youth to grave. But it does...this is really happening. No matter how big gaming became, I think all of us "hardcore" gamers actually believed that games would never change for the people, but that people would discover the magic of video games as the technology (graphics) got better. Playing games like Phantasy Star, The Legend of Zelda, and FF VII, I always felt special, like I belonged to a movement united by a frequency that only gamers could hear; those of us who had discovered the link to the other side, escaping into worlds that made the drone of this one fade away.

I always figured that it would grow by sheer tech; that people would find the graphics and magical worlds so irresistible they'd make their way through our right-of-passage—developing the skills necessary to truly bask in gaming's glory. Silly, silly me. To think that something so pure could penetrate the mass consciousness. The romantic pinings of a dreamer yet to be tainted by the cold hard reality that the path to America's mainstream is through ease-of-use and marketing. Make it easy, then make it seem like the thing to do and American's will drop trou. Gaming didn't attract the masses, businessmen and women did by stealing our magic and twisting into something "every one can enjoy." Cooking games, aerobic games, and sports games that require little more than subtle movement—that's what got us here. And should anyone with meager skills come across a traditional game, automated controls and on-screen how-to's have been installed to insure they never feel pressured or challenged. Pesky timing manoeuvres and jumps are considered glitches of the past. What's left of traditional games and game series are being created by the elder statesman of that era and the games, for the most part, aren't selling. Valkyria Chronicles would have sold a million copies in its first month during the PlayStation era but in today's market it's good for about 40k... Wii Fit, a plastic stepper that looks like Richard Simmons wet dream is all the rage. Once the remaining annoyances like Mirror's Edge—these "hard" action games—are eliminated the process will be complete and gaming as we knew it will be a relic of the past. Unless we fight back... But we're not. The press is conforming, going along for the ride and enjoying all the benefits that go with the band-wagon mentality that's ultimately destroyed anything truly special. 2008 was a missed opportunity, and a crucial missed opportunity at that. We just had three times the usual amount of great games that drop in a year hit within one, and what did the status quo do? All those hundreds of internet sites that were supposed to bring gaming to the masses? They bitched and moaned like a bunch of little girls. No matter how great the game, unless it was easy, non-linear, involved pointing and killing, and had multiplayer, it pretty much sucked. There are now three factions of "press" reviewing video games: PlayStation-era elitists hooked on urban or modern-warfare-based first-person shooters and sandbox games (with multiplayer) that think every game should follow suit or be damned (they hate things like linearity, and timing maneuvers—you know, all those irksome fundamentals); post-PlayStation era players who have never played a traditional "real" game and therefore simply wouldn't know one if they saw it; and people like me who chipped away at hour-long games Ninja Gaiden (NES) or Contra Hard Corps (Genesis) for days until they could beat consecutive levels unscathed to see the "Thank You For Playing." Admittedly those games were too hard, but mastering them gave me a sense of pride. I took a picture of the ending screens of all those games and sent them to the magazines. If I had one wish, it would have been to one day experience games like Ninja Gaiden II, Mirror's Edge, Gears of War 2, No More Heroes, and so on. Five or more hour long games just hard enough but drenched in lush visuals, real-time voiced storylines and epic scores. Well, here they are and for the most part nobody cared. I have nothing against any critics personal preference, but I do take offense when they cross the line and destroy a great game that might lead to the preservation of similar great games that they have no interest in or business critiqing in the first place. But it's really not their fault. It's the publishers who in the wake of so many potential "eyeballs" have adopted a cattle call mentality, shoehorning who ever they can drum up into "events" to satisfy an online beast too big to tame. Accuracy gave way to "eyeballs" to a dangerous extent in 2008 and the results read like a fat warning from a pig farmer. Not across the board, but enough to make a lot of consumers scratch their heads. Suddenly it's like there's a war on having fun. And good luck finding a review written for the demographic a given game is meant for, especially if it's an E-Rated license or platformer. There's simply too much access and not enough planning and positioning going on within the larger companies...you know, the ones that are dropping like flies. The smaller, more specialized publishers get it, because they can't afford not to, but within the upper echelons of gaming all journalists are created equal. After 18 years of 20-hour days I have the same access as any green freelancer weaned on Wii-Play (no offense) when it comes to the "big" games. A lot of new journalists think a trip to a big publisher to play a game in a controlled environment is just swell, when to me it's the very definition of injustice to the developer, the game, and myself. I can't review a blockbuster in a sea of partitions with a producer and PR person at my back in 3-4 hours. That's madness. I need to be locked away where I can disappear into the code for however long it takes. But that poses a problem not unlike when you were caught chewing gum in 3rd grade and asked if you brought enough for the whole class. If said giant publisher sends me review code, well, that's favoritism. That's how crazy it's become and the main reason why the press has become so polarized. You think a major

"Accuracy gave way to "eyeballs" to a dangerous extent in 2008 and the results read like a fat warning from a pig farmer"

January

Now this is how you kick off a New Year. A style-drenched blood-soaked Wii game that made me a true believer and an art-stuffed Blueside blitzkrieg that took a temporary reprieve from its RTS roots to hack, slash, cast spells, manage items and ogle my favorite Elf.

February

Devil May Cry 4
Lost Odyssey
Overlord: Raising Hell

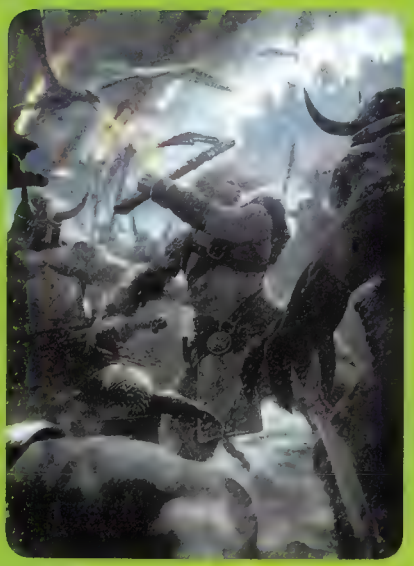
Playing the latest *Devil May Cry* saga on PS3 after an install that all but kills the loading, I had no quarrel with the heavy cinematics and environmental puzzles. In fact quite the opposite—it felt to me like the presentation had finally caught up with the elegant design and blistering action. Toss in the new and improved PS3 version of one of my favorite new franchises, *Overlord:Raising Hell* and the gorgeous JRPG I have vowed to finally complete over the break and there's a February to remember.

Just doing my job!

Do you ever look back over the year and wonder the time went? Well, I have a receipt... So let's take a look at 2008 and see what everybody is complaining about shall we?

March

My new favorite fighting game (and Nintendo's fastest selling game ever) Super Smash Bros. Brawl is pure 2D brawling perfection. I was also hot on Condemned 2 even though the usual no-feet gun-totin' FPSers ragged on the combat. They've been climbing ladders with no limbs for ten years and they can't handle a little bare knuckle action? I LOVED the no-holds-barred brutality too. Zeus only knows how Viking: Battle for Asgard didn't become the next big thing in open world gaming—the adventure elements and battles combined made it so epic and so unique...Everybody wants guns I guess. Dark Sector was another underrated game. I didn't particularly like the Tom Cruise-ian lead but DE did some wicked things with the Glaives after-touch system, and had some glorious architecture, effects (that water fight—crazy) and creatures.



April

Okami is my ICO. I considered it a perfect PS2 game and although it was no easy task for Ready at Dawn to recode it, they made its celestial lights shine just as brightly on Wii. Anytime a game with such profound Japanese influence can break the 500,000 barrier (the PS2 and Wii versions have each sold close to 300,000 copies), you know that it's truly special. By the time GTA IV arrived I'd played enough Mario Kart Wii to know that for now I've had my fill of luck-based kart racing. And it's a good thing because GTA IV consumed me, man-tagonist and all. I couldn't believe that Niko was not only dynamic but adaptive to the environments as well—a level of superhuman detail that carried through the entire game. Cast a female lead and exaggerate things a bit and it's in the running for game of the century.

May

Death Jr. II Root of Evil
LostWinds

Guiding Toku and the wind spirit Enril through Frontier Development's beautifully quixotic story book world was the most fun I had with the Wii Remote all year (although I hope the sequel is at least 2000 Wii Points long) and although DJs console debut was a remake of the PSP game, Backbone made the most of it and delivered a beautiful Wii game that allowed DJ and/or Pandora to finally spread their wings.

June

Things should be slowing down between E3 and the Q4 crush, especially after GTA IV just blew everyone's expectations out of the back of their head, but what better time to release two more giant genre busting sequels back to back: Ninja Gaiden II, which ranks among the most polished visceral and satisfying action games I've ever played; and what arguably IS the single greatest video game ever made, Hideo Kojima's gift to PS3 owners, MGS4: Guns of the Patriots. Okay—it's June. Did that just happen?

Maybe I liked Hellboy: Science of Evil so much because it slowed things down a bit. No, I'm sure it's because of the games un-movie-game-like pace and stylized action scripted from Guillermo del Toro and developed by Krome Studios. Now if I could just find the time to finish GTA IV, master Ninja Gaiden II and bask in the glory of Guns of the Patriots....

Dave Halverson
Publisher

July

...And the gaming gods smile upon me once again. Unless you were dying to get your mits on *Order Up* or *Space Chimps*, July was a no-man's land until *Soul Caliber IV* showed up on the 29th. Time to tie up any lose ends, next stop—XBLA.

August

The description sounds like a cross between Super Mario Bros. and Blinx (now there's a game that belongs on 360) about a squat fellow named Tim (in a suit no less) who's looking for a princess and murders Furbie-like critters with his butt, which is where any similarities end... to anything. But I got to know Tim at a later date. August was all about Castle Crashers which delivered beyond my sky-high expectations as a rabid fan of hand drawn 2D. The Behemoth are truly the lords of Flash, cartoon violence and by now the patch. I was already ecstatic about Bionic Commando: Rearmed (I'd gotten it for the review a few weeks before and played it non-stop until I thought I was Super Joe) but I didn't expect so much refinement in Psyonix' update of Monster Madness for PS3. I was already a fan of this cheeky overhead shoot-'em-up zombie-spoof so 'twas a nice surprise, although nowhere near as shocking a revelation that I found a third Star Wars game to like (besides Super Star Wars and Lethal Alliance on PSP). I knew I was on to something as soon as the usual suspects started hating on it for being "linear" (because moving in a general direction is a real deal-breaker) and "no multiplayer." I guess that's why it was the fastest-selling Star Wars or LucasArts game—ever.

September

After three months without a killer app., the Wii came shaking, waddling, and splattering back into my life like the twist in an M. Night Shyamalan movie—*but not The Happening because it sucked.* You know how you always wish for games that you know will never happen? Like when I ask Rare about a next-generation version of Battletoads for example. I know the answer. If they ever quipped back "yeah mate, we're all over it" I would probably crap little toads. Well, keep dreamin' kids because I've been wishing for a hand-drawn console Wario game

since Gunpei sent him in to wreck Mario's toadstool stompin' little life. I miss Gunpei Yokoi. If Gunpei were around, the Wii-Fit would have a motor on it. I love Wario—he's my favorite Nintendo character by far. I only wish they'd let him become the Triumph the Insult Comic Dog of the character stable he was born to be. After the Reggie Accord of 2008, I figured Wario for dead. I placed my Wario treasures (*Wario Land III* and *4*, Virtual Boy *Wario Land*, *Wario: Master of Disguise* and *Wario World*) into a hermetically sealed chamber (big Ziplock) and that was that.

I honestly can't remember the last time a finished game we knew nothing about (one that would matter at least) just showed up. It doesn't happen anymore. Too much on the line—gotta market, market, market. *Wow I'm really spending a lot of time on this and people said it was too short...* Anyway our Nintendo liaison (we have one—I swear) shows up one day for our scheduled drop and just sticks some Wario game into our secure Wii. That's it. Hand drawn to the tenth power, Production IG anime intro, bosses straight from the 2D gods... So right there September is already amazing, and then *de Blob* shows up, which I had pegged as one of those faceless Wii waggling puzzle games, not some oven-fresh platformer you can barely put down to take a whizz, starring a snarky little gelatinous blob. Then before the month was out we got two spanking new racing series, *Pure*—the new king of quad-based MX and *Baja: Edge of Control*—which is pretty much the Baja California peninsula in a DVD case. Queue Q4.

October

Saints Row 2 Volition, THQ/PC, 360, PS3
The Legend of Spyro: Dawn of the Dragon Étranges Libellules/Activision/PS3/Xbox 360
Crash Bandicoot: Mind Over Mutant Radical Ent./Vicarious Vis/Activision/PS3/Xbox 360
Little Big Planet Media Molecule/SCEA/PS3
Dead Space EA Redwood Shores/PS3/Xbox 360
Motorstorm: Pacific Rift Evolution Studios/SCEA/PS3
Fable II Lionhead Studios/Microsoft/Xbox 360
Far Cry 2 Ubisoft Montreal/Xbox 360/PS3

On October 7th, a pair of brightly colored dragons played by Elijah Wood and Christina Ricci swooped in to kick off the Q4 "holiday" season along with their newly-minted brother Crash Bandicoot now flying the Activision flag. Gaming's latchkey kids have finally found a home, and they've honestly never looked better. Both games are exceptional and full blown fantasy/cartoon epics. Two more grade-A open world games piled on next, making it five—count-'em—FIVE big meaty Sandbox games for 2008, followed by the sequel to the PS3 racing game that looked so good Microsoft had Evolution Studios tested for anabolic steroids, Motorstorm: Pacific Rift which I finally got around to playing about three weeks later thanks to EA Redwood Shores' Dead Space, Lionhead Studios' Fable II, and Media Molecule's global offender Little Big Planet, to which I dedicated the combined equivalent of two full-time work weeks... 3 games at least 80 hours. But games are too short right?

record label cares what joedigsrock.com says because they sent Rolling Stone a demo? Er, no—they care about selling music. Just as the movie studios qualify who covers what in advance. But not gaming. So what if the game took three years and 20 million to create, any old canned review will do. Eyeballs are eyeballs after all, right? That said, it's not the blockbusters I'm worried about, or print media. The more lopsided online reviewing gets, the better we all look. We may not all see eye to eye, but we're all focussed on serving our respective readers to the best of our ability, not out-hating each other like so many poison forums out there occupied by people that seem to have a 2x4 lodged in their chutes. What worries me is the tunnel vision/blockbuster mentality that keeps people from venturing out and trying something new and perhaps really getting something out of gaming.

But why does it seem like I'm the only one that didn't drink the Kool-Aid? And what can I do about it anyway? I'm a tiny minority in a sea of Goliaths. I used to think that way about politics too, and we just put a brilliant, genuine, charismatic African American in the White House, so maybe there's hope for traditional gaming yet. And if not, you know what— honestly, I have enough PC Engine, SuperGrafx, Genesis, SNES, N64, Sega CD, Saturn, Dreamcast, PlayStation, PS2, GameCube, Xbox, Wii, PS3, and Xbox 360 games (not to mention the ever- burgeoning flow of

November

Gears of War 2
Mushroom Men: The Spore Wars
Banjo Kazooie Nuts & Bolts Rare
Golden Axe: Beast Rider Secret
Mirror's Edge
Valkyria Chronicles
Sonic Unleashed
Naruto: The Broken Bon
Tomb Raider: Underworld

Getting back to the reason I began this list in the first place, let's take a moment to appreciate what has transpired over the past 10 months, starting waaaay back at *No More Heroes*. Anyone who works in the gaming press has access to every game on this list and more (these are just my picks). Think about that. If you're still in some forum crying about multiplayer, somewhere there's a spatula with your name on it. This is no time to whine about "linear" gameplay or the lack of a Capture the Flag mode in Golden Axe, It's time to celebrate gaming's newfound diversity. Go ahead and cry if a *Halo* style FPS doesn't have multiplayer. But action/adventure games—really? You want the developer to take a few months to whip you up a little shooter in the midst of developing a single-player epic? Please stop.

And now, back to November—does it not speak for itself? It would take most ordinary single-console owners months to accumulate the cash to afford November's bounty alone, let alone support a three-console household. You'd have to claim them as dependants.

Gears 2 kicked things off by blowing the doors off of my expectations. Epic had me at gutting a giant worm from the inside and piloting the Centaur tank, so riding Reaver-back and saddling up a Brumak (now that's power) was pretty much entrails on the cake. *Mushroom Men* also took me by surprise with its inspired, ultra-creative world and fantastic visuals, and *Mirror's Edge* delivered the first-person adventure I'd been waiting for since the chunky-monkey pixels in Doom. Crystal Dynamics delivered Lara's best outing by far, filling it with the wonder and awe I've longed for since the original, and a level of artistic prowess that ranks them among gaming's most elite studios, and although I've had my fill of JRPGS, *Valkyria Chronicles* lured me back with fresh gameplay and gorgeous visuals that put it in a league of its own. The big surprise for me however came by way of Sonic Unleashed. The more I play the new Sonic, the more I want to (but can't) love it. It's so beautiful, but by daytime Sonic is too unruly a beast and by night too lumbering. Finally, *Banjo-Kazooie Nuts & Bolts* isn't what I wanted from Rare, but I can see kids ditching the Legos and playing it for months. If only they cared to. It's the greatest

Gears of War 2

Tomb Raider: Underworld

December

Prince of Persia
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4 Atlus

I rearranged my Top 10 for 2008 again after I finished *Prince of Persia* and put it in the top slot. I've never really experienced anything like it—where I love every second of a game yet can't wait to see how it ends. It's like I *was* the story, a lot like I *was* the runner in *Mirror's Edge*, the difference being—and this is actually a good comparison—a complete dichotomy in design philosophy. You "die" a lot in *Mirror's Edge* at first and overall it's a pretty hard game, while in *Prince of Persia* you're doing similar acrobatic feats (without those pesky laws of gravity), but you can't die. I like hard games, and honestly I think I was more disappointed whenever I had to call on Elika to save me then I was hearing Faith's bones crack from a fall. It made her seem fake to me, where with Elika I was more humiliated that I (as the Prince) needed her because I was so firmly entrenched in the lead role. People say that *Prince of Persia* is too easy. But it's really not, it just masks different levels of suckage. I worked harder to never need Elika than I did to save Faith from all those harrowing plummets which meant nothing to me other than "hurry up and load." The only difference really is the loading screen. When Elika saves you—you basically "died"—you just didn't have to pay for it with your time, just a little humility, unless you just fly through *Prince of Persia* and don't care, in which case the game is lost on you because if you don't stop and look deeply into both faces of this game, you'll miss it.

December was also the perfect time to take in the RPG of the year once again, *P4*. Eight years and 150 million consoles later and the PS2 is still squeaking out diamonds. The relationship between the Midnight Channel and the real world combined with *P4*'s dating sim-like elements and that unmistakable Shin Migami Tensei style will only be beaten when it moves into the 7th generation.

Prince of Persia

traditional games on Xbox Live, PSN and the Wii Shop Channel) to last me a lifetime—many of which will make great copy in the years ahead so bon apetit America but I hope this message ignites a spark that starts a fire because you deserve better. Don't be sold out so easily. You have no idea what you are in danger of missing. So just tune out, unplug, read, think, and make your own decisions.

In the meantime here's my personal look at one AMAZING year of games. To anyone out there lucky enough to have early access to all of this and get paid to write about it; if you can't manage to eke out a little optimism and at least be civil, dig a hole and please crawl in.

Dave Halverson
Publisher

Ten Dollar (or thereabouts) Heroes

Many of 2008's best games came by way of XBLA, PSN and the Wii Shop Channel, where innovation is alive and very, very well along with 2D—which enjoyed a renaissance of sorts that's only getting stronger on the heels of avant-garde masterpieces such as Braid and World of Goo and original side-scrollers like LostWinds (for which a sequel is underway) and Castle Crashers. Shooters are back in a big way too, along with newly polished ports and beautiful remakes. Me likey!

Top 10 (sawwwwwwwww) of 2008

Castle Crashers The Behemoth/XBLA
LostWinds Frontier Developments/WiiWare
Braid Number None, Inc./XBLA
Bionic Commando: Rearmed GRIN/Capcom/XBLA/PSN
Banjo Kazooie Rareware/XBLA
Wolf of the Battlefield: Commando 3 Backbone/Capcom/XBLA/PSN
World of Goo 2D Boy/WiiWare
Söldner-X: Himmelsstürmer SideQuest Studios/PSN
Omega Five Natsume/Hudson Soft/XBLA
Boogerman: A Pick and Flick Adventure Interplay/ Virtual Console
Alien Crush Returns Tamsoft/Hudson/WiiWare

The 1st annual Tyler Durden Award goes to...

Nintendo Wii Fit

In their bid to become the Ronco of the gaming world, the company that manufactured a generation of couch potatoes devised an "activity board" to work it all off—thus fulfilling American's lifelong dream of Hula Hooping without the Hoop and rendering the old log-and-a-board obsolete.

Best Ending of 2008 (and maybe ever)

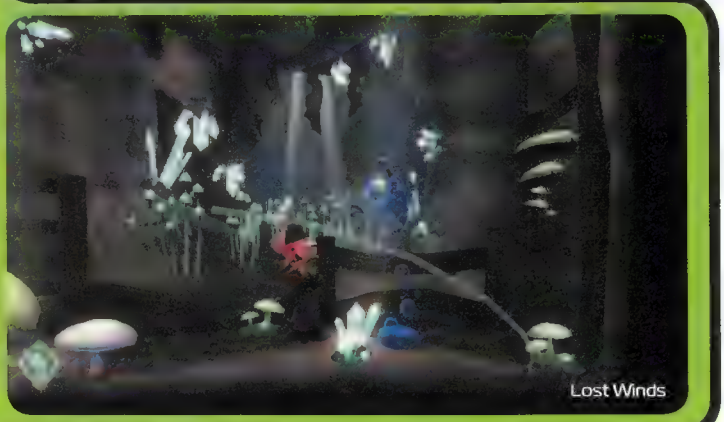
Prince of Persia

It's been long enough (spoiler alert!). How many undid it all for one last look into Elika's eyes? How many spent hours trying to find a way to revive her and keep the darkness at bay? Better yet...How many miss her? I miss her. That DS tragedy had better not be the sequel.

Worst Ending of 2008

Fable II: Seagulls...

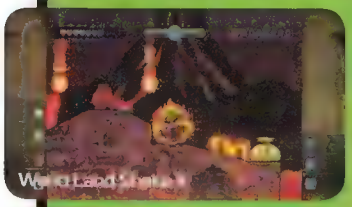
Here's how I figured it. I'm still feeling guilty about not feeding the p[illegible] thing to do. If I blew my cover, who knows what might have happened, right? If only *Fable 2* ran so deep—for a game about choice it's pretty Dick & Jane when you get right down to it. Anyway, it stood to reason that if I saved everyone—hundreds over the few or greed, that the people of Albion would award me with a new dog at the very least for my valor. And if not, there's not one damn dog in the whole region? After all that work—I own businesses and homes, people rely on me—and saving everyone's behind I have to go poochless? Spongy control, no dynamic animation and a paltry few shoot-the-red-dots bosses and I can't buy another dog? If there's a *Fable 3* I need a Bulldog and a female I can actually make hot or no deal.

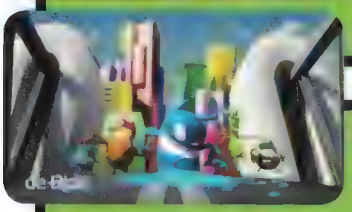


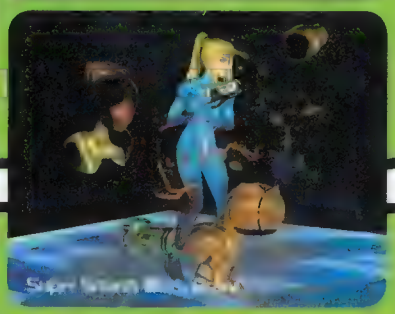
Best on Wii

Top 5 Wii Exclusive games of 2008

Somewhere between counting the loot from Wii Play, Wii Fit and DS sales Nintendo found enough time to throw us "hardcore" gamers a couple of tasty first-party bones. I pray they're not the last. Fortunately, original Wii development was alive and doing quite well elsewhere too. No More Heroes, Mushroom Men: The Spore Wars, and de Blob were all well worth the waggle and USVG prime sequel material--Wii or (hopefully) otherwise.







My argument for a side-scrolling Metroid revival on Wii... I rest my case.

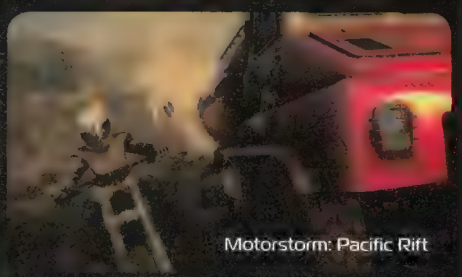
Best on PS3

Top 5 PS3 Exclusive games of 2008

Sony didn't move as many consoles as they'd have liked (or we expected) in 2008 but it's certainly not for a lack of software or power. Anyone who has witnessed what Kojima Productions achieved in-engine in MGS4 knows what an extraordinary machine the PS3 is. What a shame that it came to fruition during this freak anomoly where technology is losing out to frugality. You can't put a price on games like MGS4, Motorstorm: Pacific Rift and Little Big Planet. Diamonds like this are forever. Valkyria Chronicles and R2 shined in there respective categories as well, although I'm pining for Sly 4 and the return of Nariko.

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

Little Big Planet


Motorstorm: Pacific Rift

Resistance 2

Best on Xbox 360

Top 4 original Xbox 360 Exclusive games of 2008

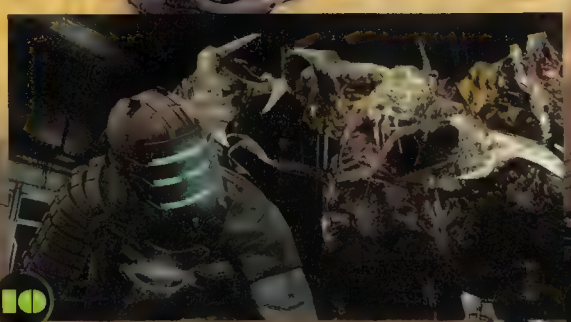
Epic had me at the Centaur Tank so by the time I climbed off of the Reaver and Brumak I was one happy Gear...all this and a fleshed out story? Dom friggin' cried! And how about that queen? I can't wait to meet Marcus's father... In other 360 news, while it was sad to see Itagaki go, NGII was the ultimate parting gift. Action adventure doesn't get any tighter or more gratifying and dang will I ever miss his femme fatales. As for Fable 2...where do I begin? How about the end...where's my freakin' dog!! Peter M. actually got me. It's just a game—so why did I sacrifice? Shame it's not a tighter controlling, better animated game with a proper jump, but what it lacked in gameplay and polish it definitely made up for by taking yet another small step towards the giant leap I'm still hoping for. Now Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts and Bolts, there's a polished game, and BIG--really BIG... whatever it is. All we wanted was a new Banjo...not this. I'll happily take it but can we get Jet Force Gemini or Kameo sequel now? Enough monkey business, just be Rare again. The people have spoken!

Dave Halverson
Publisher

Top 10 Games of 2008

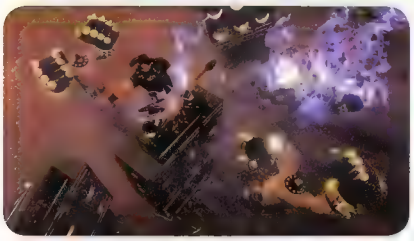
MGS4: Guns of the Patriots was, is and likely will forever be the single most polished, complete, and well-made game of all time. Moments such as Naomi's heart wrenching final decree, Snakes unabashed resolve in the face of death and Raiden's bone chilling self-sacrifice (to me the single most dramatic scene in gaming) won't be topped anytime soon, if ever given the current propensity to sacrifice substance for broad accessibility. That said fantasy and platforming is where I live and nobody did it better this year than the Prince of Persia.

01 **Prince of Persia** Ubisoft Montreal/PS3/360
02 **Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots** Konami/PS3
03 **Tomb Raider: Underworld** Crystal Dynamics/Eidos/PS3/Xbox 360
04 **Ninja Gaiden II** Team Ninja/Microsoft Xbox/360
05 **Gears of War 2** Epic games/Microsoft/Xbox 360
06 **Mirror's Edge** DICE/EA/PS3/Xbox 360
07 **Little Big Planet** Media Molecule/SCEA/PS3
08 **Wario Land: Shake It** Good Feel/Nintendo/Wii
09 **No More Heroes** Grasshopper Manufacture/Ubisoft/Wii
10 **Dead Space** EA Redwood Shores/PS3/Xbox 360



2009 Most Wanted (announced) Games

Welcome fellow (or potential) believers in our developer-given right to bask in the glory of non-military, non-multiplayer, non-generic, non-recycled themed games populated by head-bangin' roadies, gothic beauties, and backstage babes... Now I really don't care what happens after 2009. Brutal Legend, my Most Wanted game 2 years running dodged the Universal /Activision bullet and landed safely in the big-hands people at EA, thus nullifying the chance of a second Double Fine production befalling the fate of Psychonauts which was tragically cast asunder back when Microsoft declared war on platformers. 2009 will also see the return of Vanillaware's brand of too-good-for-this-world hand-drawn 2D with XSEED/Marvelous Entertainment's Muramasa: The Demon Scrolls, scantily dressed young hotties gutting zombies and other foul beasts, the Overlord and his wonderfully voracious hordes, and well, more good stuff if you'll kindly turn the page. Take your time of course.



Brutal Legend

EA/Double Fine/Xbox 360, PS3/2009

Dave Halverson
Publisher

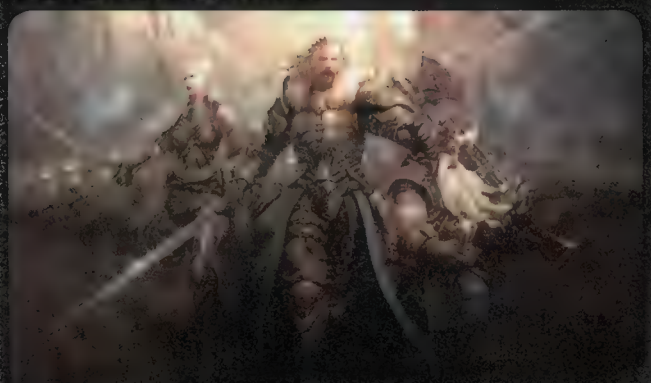
2009 Most Wanted (announced) Games

Splatterhouse

Namco Bandai games/Bottlerocket/Xbox 360, PS3

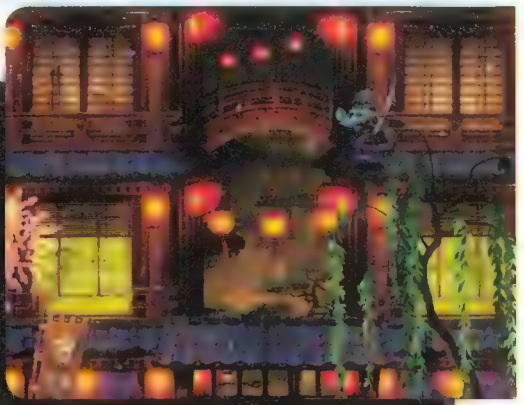
Kingdom Under Fire2

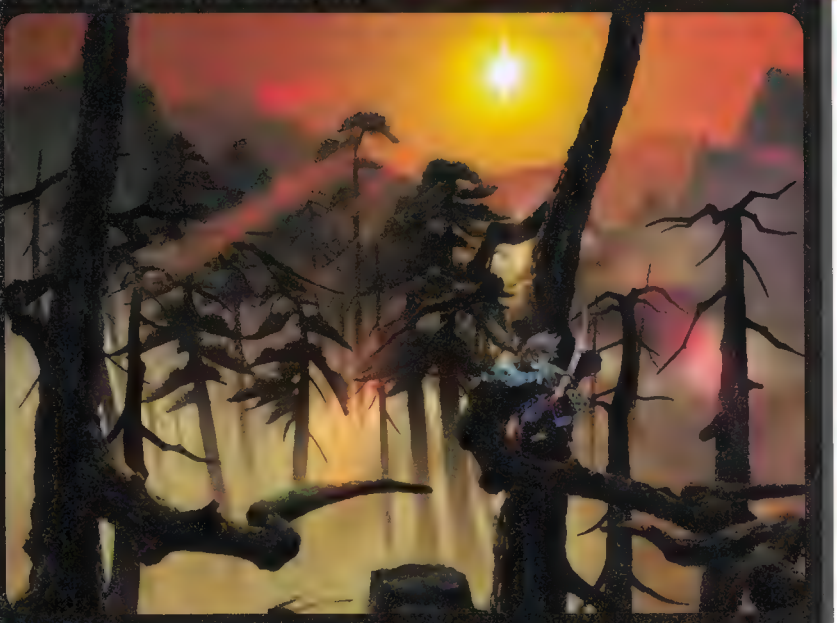
Blueside/PC, next-gen console

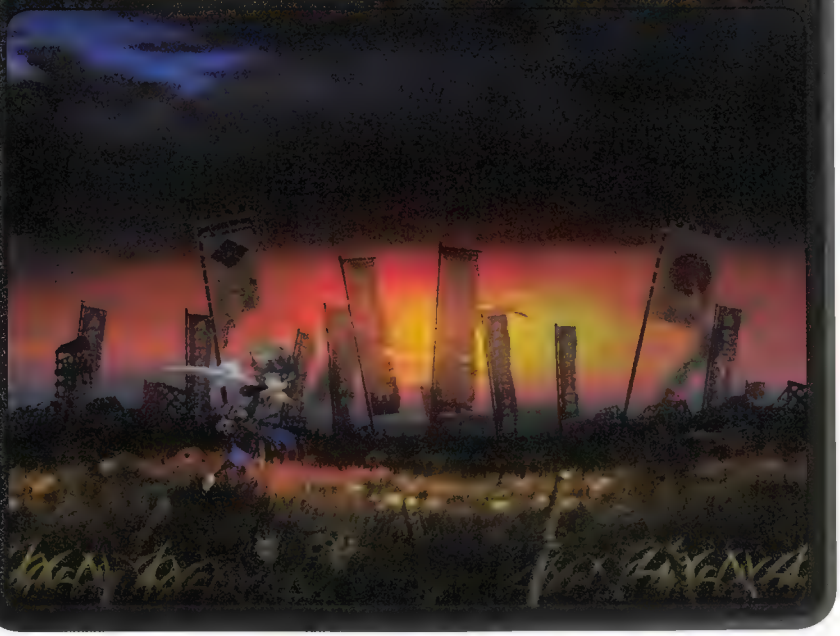


Muramasa: The Demon Blade

Marvelous/XSEED/Vanillaware/ Wii

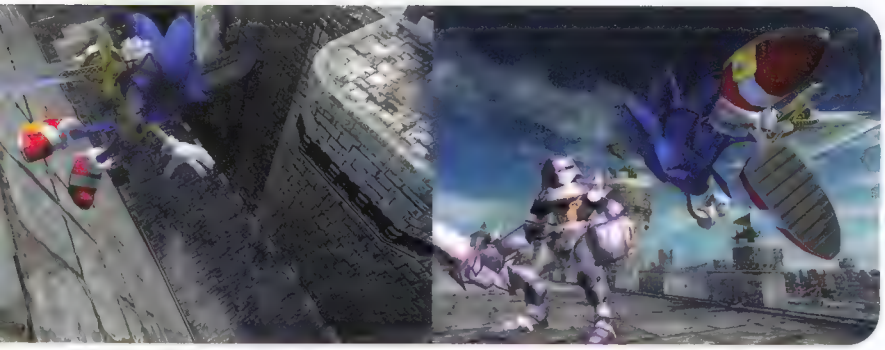






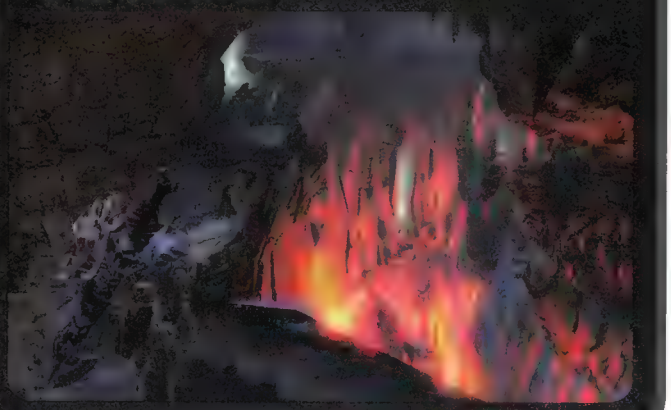
Sonic and the Black Knight

Sega/Wii



Darksiders

THQ/Vigil/Xbox 360, PS3



Overlord 2

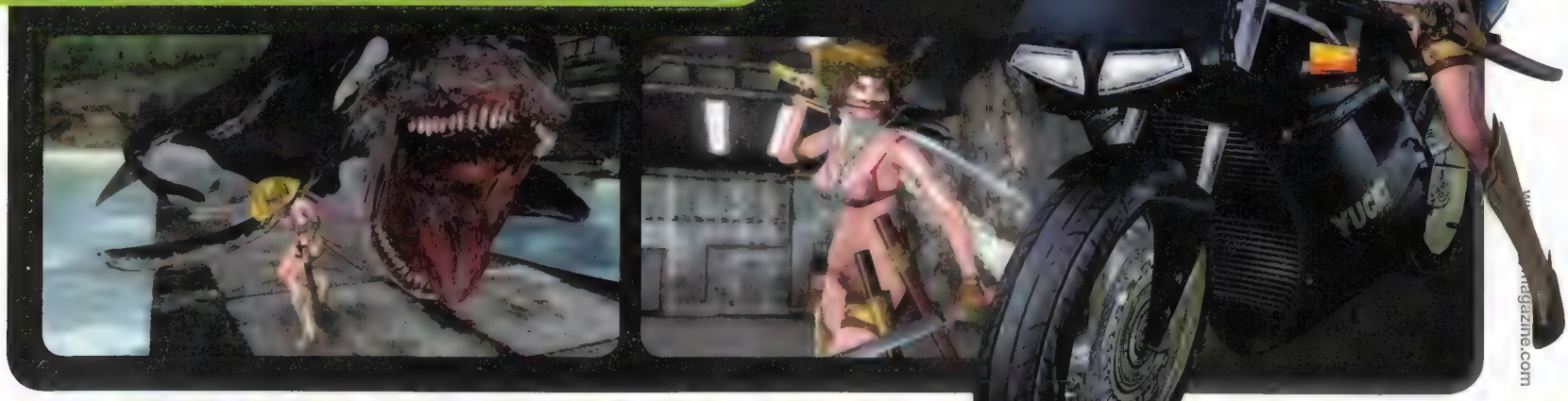
Codemasters/Triumph/Xbox 360, PS3 -Wii version sold separately

Bayonetta

Sega/Platinum,/Xbox 360, PS3

Onebanchara: Bikini Samurai Squad/ Bikini Zombie Slayers

D3/Tamsoft/Xbox 360/Wii resp



Brady Fiechter
Editor In Chief

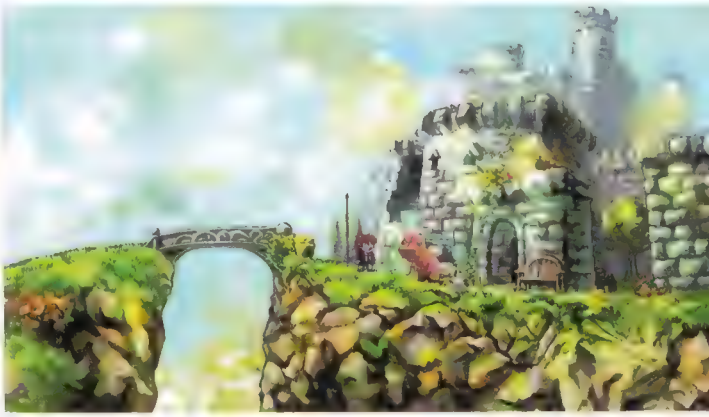
My Favorite Games

2008, it was good

"There was no single game that stood out above the rest."

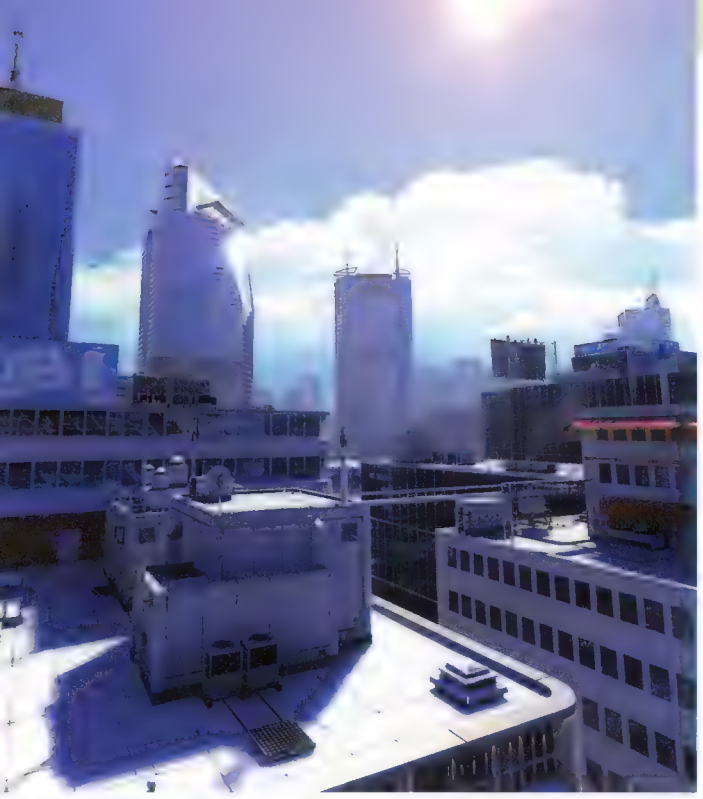
Braid

Games tend to forgo intimacy for grandiosity, and by their nature the worlds expand and grow into a monster by your decisions in a malleable space. Braid was all intimacy, essentially created by a singular artist and designer, whose collective reach was always in the right place. I hesitate to call any game this year brilliant, but there were indeed slices of brilliance in the time-shift design philosophies of Jonathan Blow, who called into question what drives our interpersonal relationships and the selfish power we ultimately desire. The princess was both a metaphor and a clever signpost to our gaming past, where Blow tapped for mechanical inspirations while inventively coiling a theme of forgiveness into the cause and effect of gameplay—and the world it informed. The puzzles we were asked to solve were at times perhaps too vexing, but they never cheated, the solution was always in front of you, even if you couldn't quite grasp it. The ending is perhaps where the game goes too far in its abstractions, but what an opportune time to unravel the entire thread and let us decide for ourselves what it all meant to jump on the head of little creatures and grab a key. We do these things all the time in games, kill and unlock, without any form or consequence. Braid was a game that moved me at times, took me where I've never gone in a game, and for whatever its eventual misdeeds, I was grateful to be experiencing Braid every second I was in its grasp.



Tomb Raider: Underworld

How irresponsible of me to highly enjoy Tomb Raider 8, yet another Lara Croft adventure that sticks lovingly to the formula! Or how about: how disappointing of an industry to have such a hard time making games more engrossing than this. No one wants to touch the adventure genre—true adventure, sprawling and moody and spirited—leaving Tomb Raider to be the lone beating heart of its kind. And it still beats soulfully strong, thanks to Crystal Dynamic's understanding of what still makes a Lara Croft adventure magic. This was one of the best-looking games of the year, and within its beauty existed tangible lines that drew stair steps of interaction you don't often get in games; all this beauty was interactive, with puzzles and manipulation and the constant touching of the surface to get around. I loved it. Some argued that Uncharted left Tomb Raider as an ancient entity, which says nothing of the deeper perspective that Tomb Raider is better designed as an adventure, better at communicating its tactile nature of character against environment. Now as for that flimsy gunplay combat, either drop it or make it good...



Mirror's Edge

And here it is, my almost-definitive game of the year, the game that plenty of people downright loathed, picked apart as a fractured experiment, called a one-trick pony, decided was too challenging in all the wrong ways. Call it what you will, but Mirror's Edge, in its best moments, was thrilling. Giving me something new isn't an automatic pass toward greatness, but the first-person adventure was the kind of rush I'm looking for in game design, and there was simply no other feeling like it this year. I loved that not every jump and climb was spelled out, leaving a careful eye to study the gorgeous and intricate stage before me. This was an adventure, a push through an obstacle course that was an intoxicatingly illusive world. There is no doubt the combat was tepid and unfortunate in its inclusion—an entire game where you don't shoot is where we need to go—but the bad was simply not enough to remove the good of the adrenaline from my happy gaming veins.

Pixel Junk Monsters

If obsession marked the year's best game, then Pixel Junk Monsters gets the nod for the No 1 spot. I couldn't stop playing this game, trapped in its magnetically basic strategies that were so much fun I found myself playing it over breakfast, on breaks, before dinner, after the girlfriend went to bed, when I couldn't sleep... One of the game's huge appeals was its high challenge and bite-size sessions, during which I could jump in and out with not a loss of flavor or engagement. It's easy to lose track of a game and move on, but Pixel Junk Monsters brought me back time and time again, until I finally took down that last march of evil creatures marauding so deviously through my intricate fortress of defense. For console owners, this was the most singularly distinct game of the year.

My Favorite Games

Bionic Commando Rearmed

Bionic Commando was a geometrically delightful playground, a little place where strictly staged patterns and rigid rule sets demanded the sweat pouring off your brow in concentration. It represented the style and appeal of a 2D construct that simply cannot be duplicated in full-3D movement, and did so with flair and reverence. And it was a treat to look at, an admirably authentic throwback to oldschool Bionic Commando with a modern glow. This was one of the best examples of how to treat an ancient license, retain the spirit without getting bogged down with the need to reinvent. High praise goes to the few but awesome boss designs.

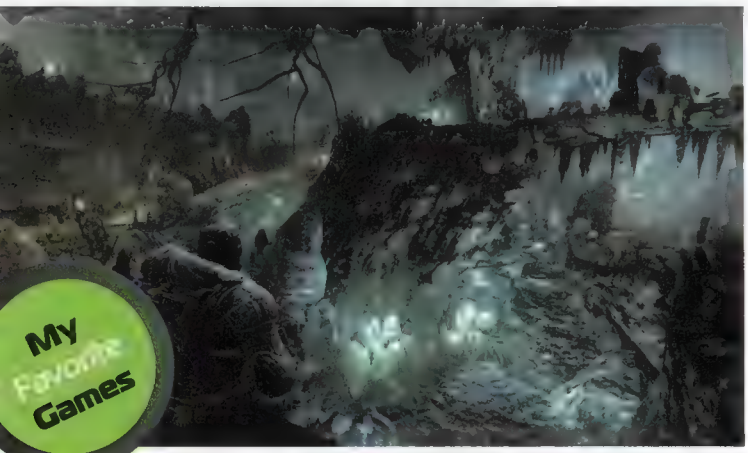
Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

If I must award a game for finest level of craft, let it be Metal Gear Solid 4. Despite its bombastic narrative and overly earnest delivery, the game handled its daring theme with such grace and artistry, such technical prowess and an eye for detail that I couldn't help but be mesmerized by what Hideo Kojima had created. Who knows the real mind behind the final vision, but there is a direction and oneness to the game that feels like someone very specific, very talented brought it all together. Its consistency was remarkable for a video game. For such a massive project, Metal Gear 4, love it or leave it, delivered exactly what it wanted: operatic story telling in an operatic world of war, machine and man. At once silly and spectacular and highly entertaining.

Brady Fiechter
Editor In Chief

5 Biggest Surprises of the Year

The downloadable space offers some of the best games of the year. The best is yet to come?
The Wii continues to sell like mad while the PS3 sputters
Willy Nelson loves Wii sports with his kids
The new Xbox Live is actually not half bad
Plenty of great games that weren't the typical sequels

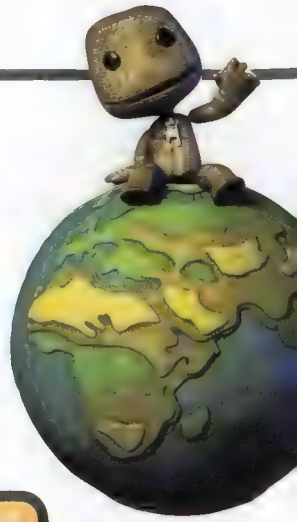


My Favorite Games

Gears of War 2

Superior to the first game in every way that counts, Gears of War 2 was a powerhouse sequel: big, bad, bold, and beautiful. Gears of War suffered by a lack of contrast and heavy-handed use of the same mechanic to its breaking point, but this time Cliff Blezinski and his fellow gearheads manufactured one giant surprise after another, culminating in the Panzer Dragoon-meets-Lord of the Rings-meets-Matrix aerial combat on the back of the giant reavers. Best head shots of the year almost made you forget the lame one-liners these jarheads loved to spit out. Dumb, badass and at the end of the day, the most kick-ass game of the year.

Little Big Planet



So beguiling was Little Big Planet's wonderful presentation that it was easy to pretend that the design backing the gameplay was equally extraordinary. Which it wasn't; pretty damned good would have to do. This game soared on the winds of visual magnificence, from the moment a twisted version of Humpty Dumpty gets rocked off his perch, cracking into interactive pieces, to the Day of the Dead spectacle and applause-inducing pleasure of destroying a jail and spilling out the plastic toy cowboys. No game this year bristled with such personality and joy, and even if the physics-based locomotion sullied the controls and inconsistent design creeped in now and again, the best was left to your own imagination: building a level has never been so much fun.

Resistance 2 and the abstractions of opinion

Going back to Resistance 2 the second time, it struck me how far it missed the mark in some key areas, and just how much better Resistance: Fall of Man was in the scheme of things. There's a story here worth exploring: I can't help but look back the second time and notice just how badly mishandled certain elements really were. The trial-and-error gameplay could be obnoxious, the AI in the squad was distractingly poor, the design was inconsistent and forced to be something it was never meant to be. Insomniac forgot the heart and soul of Resistance, but such a broad indictment is kind of what makes R2 so interesting to me: I still struggle putting a finger on what exactly went wrong. No game this year was so critically elusive in the most fascinating ways; I've never gone from really liking a game to wanting to pick it apart the second time through. Resistance 2 was the most frustrating good game of the year.

Call of Duty 5: Yes, War Sucks

For a while now, the war game has directly worked the entertainment angle while loosely attempting to inform us that war is horrible. Expansive first-person shooters quite enjoy using man's desire to kill each other in mass battles as their backbone, granting us the opportunity to put an end to a horrible enemy opposition that rightly deserves to bloody die! This year though— enough just seemed enough. Even the faceless fictional wars that strain to mirror our modern conflicts are growing somewhat tiresome, but it was 2008 during which the World War II theme especially needed to be retired. Playing Call of Duty 5: World at War, for the first time the killing in the name of country and man and whatever left me too disturbed by the unprecedented depictions of graphic violence within the authentic context. Simply presenting death as a hollow blood-and-guts affair is something we need to look more sensitively into—especially when framed against historical tragedies. War is hell, and the way we're treating it in an age of expressive HD graphics calls for a newfound code of ethics in our active medium.

5 Things I Hate

I am an adult gamer. Why are so few games squarely aimed at my demographic, which is huge?
Squad members who spout vapid one-liners. Every single stinking game with squads does this now.
Female characters who arbitrarily flaunt their tits. It's not sexy, it's out of place and distracting. Add to this costumes that make no sense within the setting. Shame on you Metal Gear.
Achievements. Yes, achievements.
Constant system updates, game updates, dead controllers, chords that aren't long enough—all the by-products of the HD generation.

5 Things I Love

Downloadable games. Indie movement is growing.
Co-op is becoming the norm, and it's great.
Charge stations for controllers.
The Sixaxis now rumbles. How did it once not?
The definition of "good" gameplay is evolving.

No More Heroes

No More Heroes was a bit overextended and rough around the edges, but its struggles were easy to ignore the farther I dropped into its strange and daring world of colorful dementia. Like Killer 7 before it, Suda 51's visions were so far removed from the typical gaming archetype that I was simply grateful to be witness, excitedly anticipating what might come next. The Wii rarely works as a genuinely progressive control scheme, but the motion tracking in No More Heroes actually further flavored the enjoyment of interacting in the world. A labor of love that was in a whacked-out league of its own.

My Favorite Games

Mario Kart

Until games do something consistently more fulfilling, I like games that are fun, and Mario Kart was a blast from start to finish. Those times where strategy failed and luck took its course, the fun did not stop, but merely solidified in my desire to take back the trophy on the next run, fiercely dolling out the same dastardly shell to my jerk opponents. Nintendo has a way of making us smile and laugh, simply with the little stroke of a character flourish or the swath of sound emanating from an iconic image. There were bigger and better and more original games this year, but few that were this downright fun. Simple, intrinsic, and full of character, Mario Kart was everything that I once appreciated in classic games. No apologies needed for the random chaos of it all.

Also...

10 Moments That Were A Little Special

5 Biggest Disappointments of the Year

PS3 struggles to find itself and shows us HOME, which appears DOA
Condemned 2, HAZE, FABLE 2
My 360 breaks down, not once, not twice, but three times
The PSP gets slightly redesigned and is now even less appealing
LBP recalled because of Koran sensitivities, Fallout 3 banned in India, Gears of War 2 banned in Japan/Germany

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Preamble

I must confess: Year-end summations are always fun to read, but only because the idiot manchild writing them is, invariably, also a steaming putz whose opinions are coming out of a wholly unpalatable orifice.

Right now, the last thing on my mind is 2008. It was a crappy year, and we're better off being done with it. The only good thing, truly, to come out of 2008 was that our government thought to reverse the current economic malaise by doling out insanely large sums of money to both people and faceless corporations that were wholly unworthy of them.

This is great news for me personally, as I'm hoping to be bailed out to the tune of $385 million. I am not greedy.

Science has failed us yet again. Another year has come and gone, and there is still no supercomputer on the market powerful enough to allow me to shoot video game zombies while it spits out a "year in review" feature that's pithy enough to make it seem as if I am not a boorish, stinking patoot. I long for the day when I get to poke the old Editron 8235 with a stick and set it to writing such well-worn platitudes as "[Insert year here] was a great time to be a video game fan."

"This is great news for me personally, as I'm hoping to be bailed out to the tune of $385 million"

The Articles

Frankly, I don't remember if 2008 was a great time to be a video game fan. That's the trouble with most of these year-end writeups: They assume the person writing them can, say, reach back to January and February with unerring recall. Truth in advertising demands I state I can't remember if I wore pants yesterday.

Some of what I do remember, I know I don't like. I remember attending a Sony-held event during the 2007 Game Developers Conference and seeing the virtual world Home for the very first time. Home looked to be the worst video games had to offer. It was loud, devoid of substance, a seeming paradise for idiots looking to abuse their anonymity (as well as their fellow man), and a fairly transparent way for Sony to milk every available cent from its clientele.

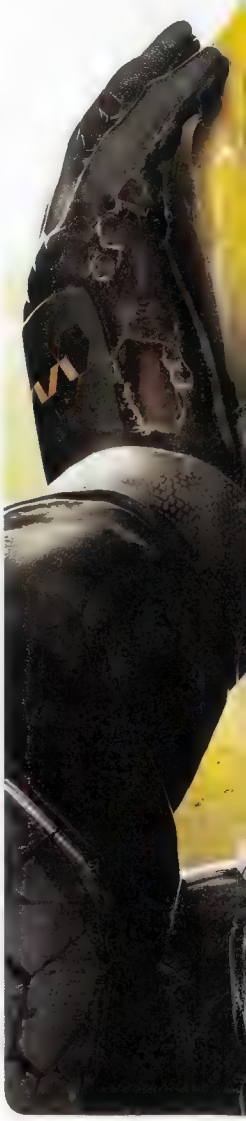
After 18 months, Home is still not complete, but it seems to have fulfilled its promise. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre noted that hell is other people; Home demonstrates how true this statement is. Women, some of them female in real life, are made targets on Home. Men, some of them females attempting to avoid persecution, flock toward the female avatars. At bare minimum, the women are verbally harassed. At worst, they're forced to endure a sea of "males" performing dances around their character in the lamest courtship ritual since the sonnet.

Home is not a game. Yet it's possible to cite Home as, at least for now, a cautionary tale on where games are headed. In 2008, developers and publishers focused on interaction between game players, the shared experience. They worked their mojo day and night to ensure game content would not remain static—that it would grow and evolve past its release-date content. And, gods yes, everyone did his able best to squeeze a little extra cash out of players.

Right now, there's no place like Home—but only to illustrate the trends that dominated the game industry in 2008.

Pinch The Penny...

Economic concerns now weigh heavily on everyone's minds. As this article is being written, developers are struggling with the bottom line. Some, like the respected Factor 5 (Lair, Star Wars: Rogue Squadron) and Free Radical (Haze, TimeSplitters) may not be



"...consoles are becoming more and more like PCs."

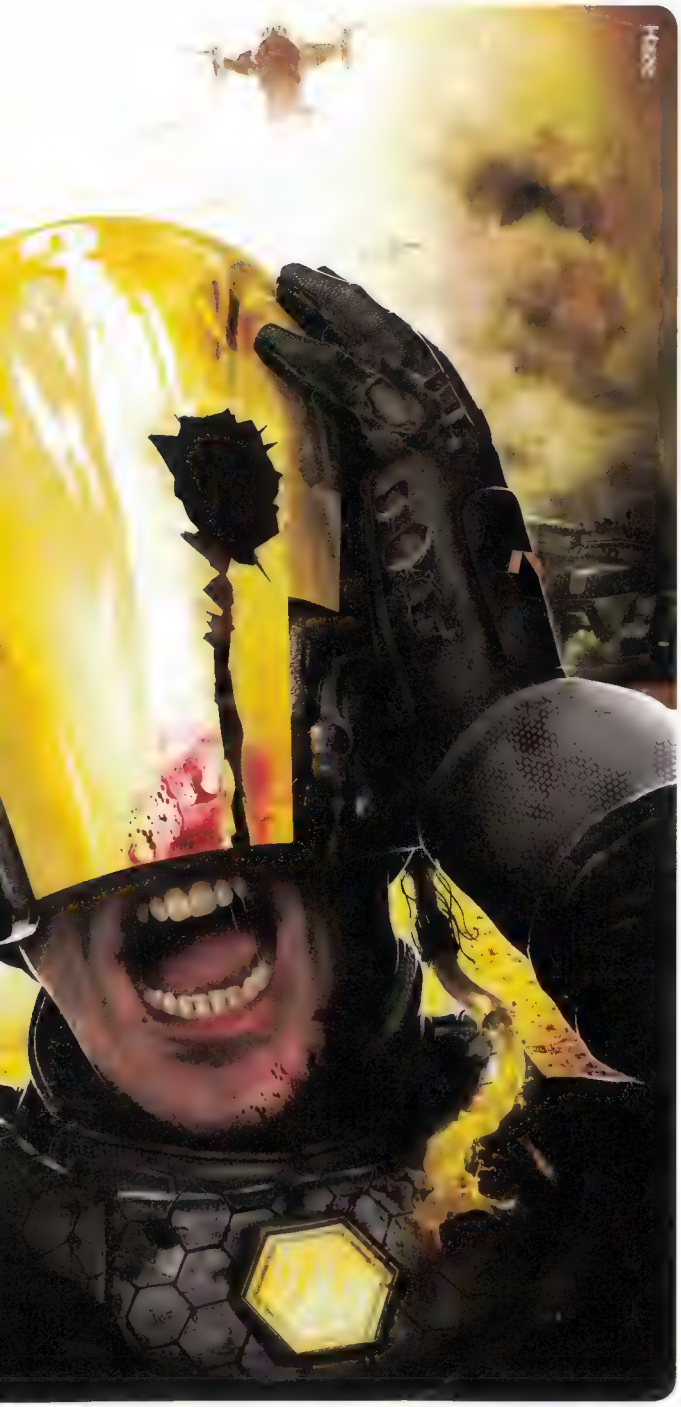
able to escape their financial hardship.

With economic markets taking a downturn, issues such as piracy and the used-game market have game makers thinking out loud. Developers and publishers have alternately applied the carrot, as seen with Epic's offering of free game maps in the PC/Xbox 360 title Gears of War 2, and the stick—Electronic Arts' use of the controversial SecurROM copy protection software—to try and minimize losses.

As the industry struggles with these issues, players can expect to become guinea pigs, ever more wary of being treated like children or, worse, cash machines. While the big boys sort out their financial woes, games will become ever-more dependent on the cash cow that is online microtransactions for extra $$$.

If you want a pair of jeans for your character in Home, Sony is willing to sell you one.

This does not bode well for anyone.



Ship It Now, Patch It Later...

Alone in the Dark was a failed attempt at survival horror. Fallout 3 was a wonderful action role-playing game. Both were released entirely too soon, and with a series of bugs. Both adopted the policy that it's best to get a game out the door now and fix it, well, whenever.

The widespread adoption of online services means consoles are becoming more and more like PCs. And this, of course, is problematic. Standards for console releases have declined, and games are being released with an eye toward sales first and a patch second.

It wasn't just Alone in the Dark and Fallout that fell victim to the money now, patch later philosophy. Heavy hitters like Lionhead/Microsoft and Rockstar had to fix two of the year's most anticipated titles in Fable II and Grand Theft Auto 4, respectively, after the fact.

No one expects titles to be released without bugs. Everyone does, however, expect developers and publishers to do due diligence with their releases.

And, yes, Home will need to be fixed shortly after its general release.

Play Together, Share Together...

It wasn't all grim in 2008. While Home was showing us how ugly the shared experience could be, Little Big Planet (which also debuted at the 2007 Game Developers Conference), offered an opposing viewpoint. The little game that could, did.

Planet allowed players to create their own platforming challenges, and then share them online. This, then, is about as good as games get.

Titles such as Left 4 Dead and Rock Band 2 reminded us that, although we may be curmudgeonly and inclined toward a solitary existence, it is good to take up arms (or guitars, whatever) with others, because, ultimately, video games are a hobby. And when we're done bitching and moaning about them, it's really excellent to play and enjoy them.

Amen.

Casey Loe
Associate Editor

5 Games That Didn't Get a Fair Shake

They weren't the best games of 2008, but these unsung gems deserved a whole lot better than they got—both from the media and their own publishers.

Bangai-O Spirits (DS)

Despite user-creation being one of the most talked about topics of 2008, Bangai-O Spirits was almost completely overlooked in favor of the superior Little Big Planet. But my appreciation for the community aspects of Bangai-O Spirits only grew once Little Big Planet was released, and so many of that title's finest user-created levels were "moderated" out of existence by anonymous, unaccountable censors. I don't blame Sony and Media Molecule for wanting not to be sued, but I have no interest in user-created content when users are forbidden to even allude to the games, movies, and TV shows that form our shared cultural heritage.

Which brings us back to Bangai-O Spirits, a game that lets you convert your creations to audio files and upload them to YouTube or FileShare or anywhere else you want. You can recreate Zelda dungeons and fill them with penises, and no one can do a damn thing about it. LBP deserves all the credit it got for its amazingly robust creation tools, but when future developers research ways of distributing user-created content, I hope they'll shun LBP's Orwellian "community moderation" and take inspiration from Bangai-O Spirits instead.

Wild Arms XF (PSP)

Wild Arms XF is the best isometric strategy game I've played in years. It has serious flaws, such as a cumbersome battle-prep interface, but its eccentric character classes and varied missions succeed masterfully at turning the tired Final Fantasy Tactics formula on its head. Too bad virtually no one else felt that way—most western reviewers found the game frustrating, excessively complicated, and "too deep for a portable title." Meanwhile, every straight-up re-skinning of Final Fantasy Tactics gets a metacritic of 75 or higher. I guess critics just want to play the exact same strategy game over and over again, using the same tank fighters to protect the same mages and archers in the same kill-everyone-on-the-battlefield mission, with some lame rock-paper-scissors damage-bonus system as the only "innovation."

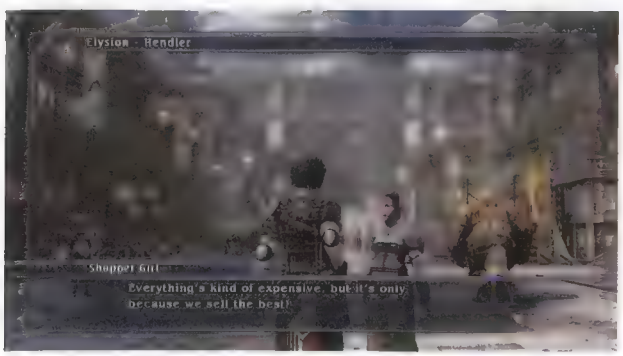
If you'd rather experience something new and interesting and, yes, "too deep for a portable title," track this unsung masterpiece down. It won't set you back more than $20, and it's worth it for the soundtrack alone. *(Full disclosure: I ended up working on the English localization of this game, but I fell in love with it—and gave it a glowing review for Play—long before I had any professional relationship with the title or its publishers.)*

Tales of Vesperia (360)

Tales of Vesperia is probably the most critically successful game on this list, but it wasn't nearly successful enough. You'd be hard-pressed to find an RPG fan on either side of the Pacific who doesn't consider Vesperia to be both the series' best installment and the best JRPG of the entire generation, but it still couldn't win much attention from the western media, nor from its publisher's own marketing department. Namco Tales Studio didn't do themselves any favors by making a demo out of one of the game's least interesting areas and most frustrating bosses, and sadly, that was the beginning and the end of the marketing campaign. Would it have bankrupted Namco Bandai to cut up 30 seconds of the game's gorgeous intro and throw it onto Toonami?

For their part, the mainstream media once again proved that JRPG reviews are capped at an 8 and that even positive reviews must contain pretentious speechifying about how the JRPG genre "needs to evolve"—as if the FPS games they lavish 9's and 10's upon aren't merely enhanced versions of their Xbox predecessors.

If Namco Bandai and the gaming media couldn't rise to the occasion to make a big deal out of a game that truly deserved it, then it's probably time to write off the Tales series in the west.



SIREN: Blood Curse (PS3)

What should have been a bold and compelling experiment in online distribution was botched at every turn by its publisher. In Japan, the 12 episodes of SIREN: Blood Curse were briefly available in the manner for which they were designed: with one downloadable episode unlocked per day. But you had to buy the entire game at full retail price to play it, and with no ability to resell it when you were done, all but the wealthiest and most foolish of gamers waited for the physical release. In America, Sony took a page from Nintendo's playbook of hardcore-game failure and announced SIREN only a week before they released it. While the online version was discounted to $40 (now $30) and didn't have to compete with a physical release, all 12 episodes were dumped out at once, despite the game clearly having been designed for a serialized release.

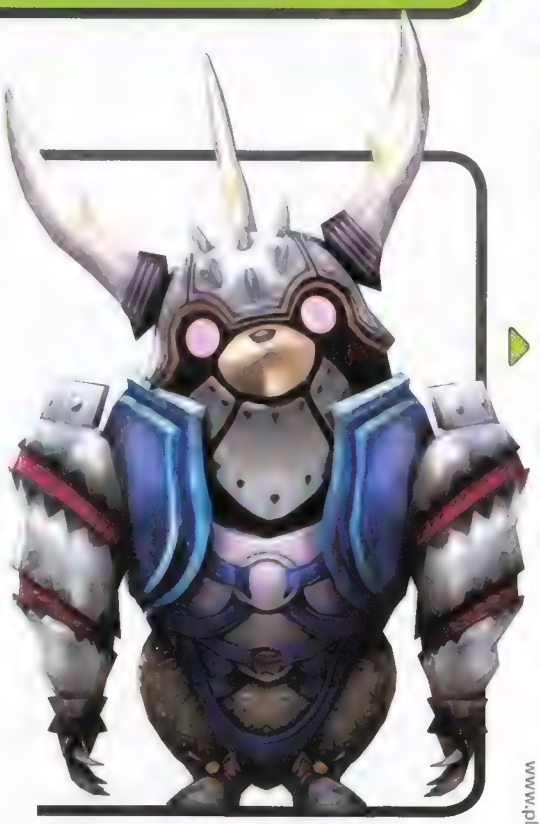
Had episodes of SIREN been released weekly, for a few bucks each or a low-cost season pass, it might have garnered the sort of anticipation and discussion that serialized TV shows do. The game was certainly compelling enough, with its shocking cliffhangers and a handful of per-episode unlockables to keep people busy until the next chapter arrived. Instead, the few people who were aware SIREN existed at all ripped through in a weekend and moved on. Sure, an episodic release might have failed miserably, but then what was the point of making an episodic game at all?

The Last Remnant (360)

I'm sure I sound like a broken record here, but if western game critics hate Japanese RPGs so goddamn much, why do they bother reviewing them? I've never seen a wider gulf between the buyers of a game, who universally gave The Last Remnant a thumbs-up, and the reviewers of a game, who (almost) universally tore it a new asshole. To be fair, when played from the disc, frequent loading and texture pop-in issues make The Last Remnant seem like a sloppy mess. The ability to install the game with NXE fixes 90% of the problem, but reviewers had no way of knowing that. (NXE launched, tragically, the day before the game's release.) A company of Square Enix's stature certainly deserves criticism for launching a game in such a state.

But really, who cares? Have you ever stopped playing a game you were enjoying because of a bit of slowdown in a non-interactive part, or because the hero's shirt texture arrives a few seconds late for event scenes? The Last Remnant is a very good game—it looks nice (technical issues aside), sounds great, and has a ton of content. It's probably the most non-linear game Square-Enix has made since the original Romancing Saga, and its battle system does a beautiful job of capturing the scale of army-vs-army combat.

As critics, we're constantly demanding developers do something new and innovative, and when we do, we rip the games for being unpolished. The Last Remnant deserves criticism for its flaws, but its critics seem to have gotten so wrapped up in cataloging them that they didn't notice the thoroughly enjoyable game beneath. If you don't believe me, ask your friends or check your favorite internet forum: The clear RPG-fan consensus is that The Last Remnant is a damn fine game.



Casey Loe
Associate Editor

The Importer's Guide to 2008

Two years ago, I predicted that this would be the generation in which import gaming dies. The rise of the North American game industry and intense competition among publishers like Atlus, NIS, and XSEED seemed to spell the end of Japan-only releases. Little did I realize that the Japanese and North American sides of the industry would grow as far apart as they did, and that the American branches of both Sony and Nintendo would decide to abandon so much of their Japanese software line-ups. To my wallet's chagrin, 2008 proved to be another banner year for import gaming.

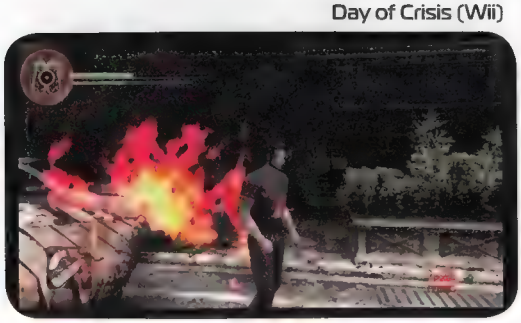
PlayStation 3

What sorrow that the most import-friendly system has the fewest games worth importing. The big exception is **Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan**, a spectacular game that will almost certainly never be localized. But unless you're nearly fluent in Japanese, you won't understand the story or even how to navigate some of the game's menu systems. (You should be able to muddle through the game, however, simply by following your auto-map.) At least it won't cost you much to try; the PlayStation 3: The Best version retails for $30-40.

Wii

Nintendo of America inexplicably refused to localize many of their parent company's best titles, and will likely never allow anyone else to do so either. If this trend continues, the Wii will surely become *the* import platform of this generation. Too bad that it's such a pain to play Japanese games on your Wii; you either need to keep your firmware at version 3.2 or lower and use a Freeloader disc (which now cost around $5), sacrificing your ability to download WiiWare and Virtual Console games, or you need to hack your Wii and download special software into it (look for details online).

Fatal Frame IV was one of the Wii's best games, and even non-Japanese speakers should be able to enjoy it with some help from an online FAQ. (You won't fully understand the story, but does anyone *ever* fully understand a Fatal Frame story?) **Disaster: Day of Crisis** is a fine choice for those seeking a popcorn action game, and is already fully in English. Those looking for more exotic fare can try Nintendo's GLBT-themed action title, **Captain Rainbow**. Finally, **Tatsunoko vs. Capcom** is a must-import for fighting game fans—rights issues will probably keep it from ever seeing a legitimate U.S. release.

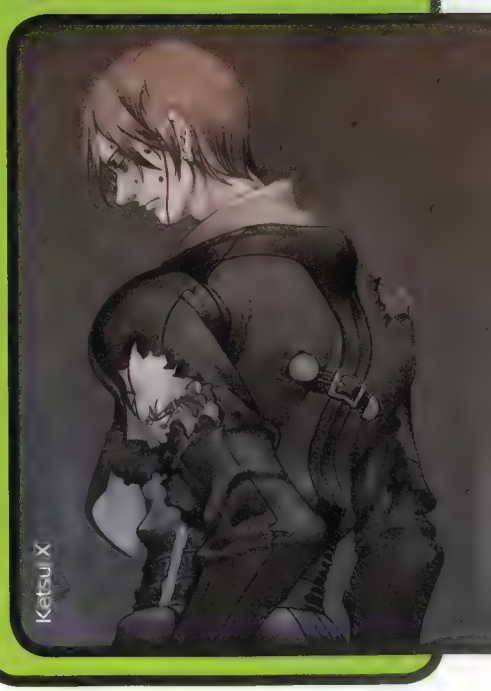


Day of Crisis (Wii)

Xbox 360

2008 saw the Xbox 360 transform into the platform of choice for fans of arcade shooters, with Konami's **Otomedius G**, Taito's **Raiden IV** and Success's **Raiden Fighters Aces** already available, and Cave's **Death Smiles**, **Dodonpachi Daioujou Black Label X**, and **Ketsui X** all on the way for 2009 (alongside other, lesser titles). With the genre for packaged shooters completely cannibalized by downloadable ones in the US, these games have few prospects for a North American release.

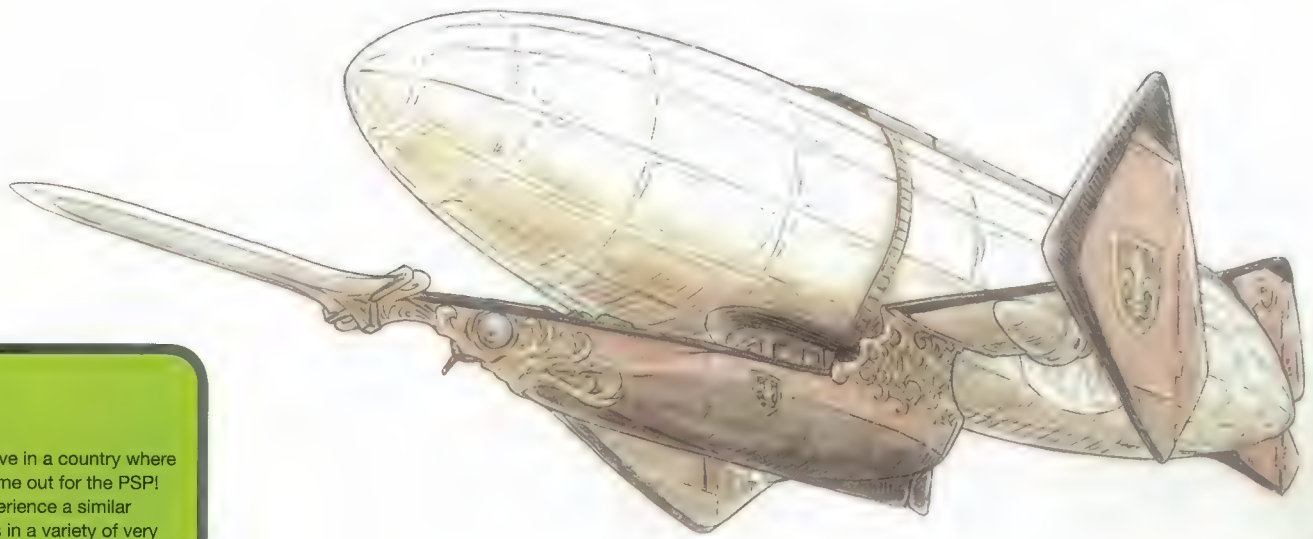
That hasn't stopped their bastard publishers from coding them as Japan-only releases, forcing would-be-importers to pay $200 - $250 for a Japanese-region Xbox 360 on top of the $60-$70 retail price for each game. Who could have guessed that good ol' Japanese space shooters would one day become the exclusive domain of the moneyed elite?



Nintendo DS

In Japan, RPG makers are deserting consoles in droves for cheaper costs and (slightly) higher sales on the DS. But in America, portable RPGs that don't have "Final Fantasy" on the box are lucky to sell 30,000 units. With the market already saturated by Square Enix's frequent, high-quality releases, a lot of quality games are going unlocalized.

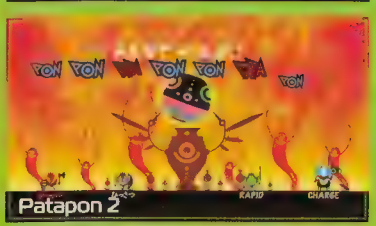
So far, there isn't a single must-import in the bunch. But classic RPG fans will enjoy Tecmo's **Winds of Nostalgeo** or **Mugen no Frontier: Super Robot Taisen OG Saga**, and Tales fans will surely want to pick up **Tales of Innocence** and the upcoming **Tales of Hearts**. Those with limited Japanese skills should be able to get through Nintendo's **Soma Bringer**, but it won't be much fun without friends on co-op. Pretty slim pickings so far, but expect plenty more import exclusives in 2009.



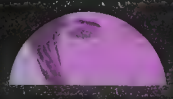
PSP

It must be nice to live in a country where games actually come out for the PSP! Importers can experience a similar thrill by importing titles in a variety of very PSP-esque niches. Anime fans can pick up the excellent 3D shooter **Macross Ace Frontier** and fan-wank battler **Gundam vs. Gundam**. Fans of Sony's own quirky PSP titles can pick up **Patapon 2** (which should be a breeze for Patapon veterans to play), or its spiritual cousin, **Yuusha no Kuse ni Namaiki da 2** (which will require a bit of Japanese knowledge).

Falcom, our favorite PSP developer, is once again ending the year without a North American publisher. The trilogy of **Sora no Kiseki** games are still the greatest RPG's on the platform, and are now available in one convenient box set. **Vantage Master** was a fun RPG-ish board game, and the just-released **Zwei!!** is an action-RPG with fantastic hand-drawn graphics that shouldn't require much Japanese knowledge to play.



Winds of Nostalgeo (DS)



Heather Anne Campbell
Associate Editor

No Yes, and No No: Games in Shades of Gray

Los Angeles doesn't get cold in stages. Every year, the weather shifts from summer to Siberian in a single day. There's no gradient. In California, we get winter and summer, *only*. And it's not just the weather here that's so sudden, so decisive. All our options in Los Angeles are binary. Sun or rain. Drive or walk. Love or hate. Celebrities here don't have an autumn—in Hollywood, they're either on the rise, or long fallen. Our films are hits or flops. Our fast-moving lifestyles demand black and white absolutes: step on one side of the line, *now*, because nobody has the time for shifting shades of gray.

Nobody has time for nuance.

Most American popular culture is born here, in Los Angeles. Our movies, our music, our overnight Internet hits, all bubble up here like tar. Our entire social consciousness finds its genesis in these four-hundred-ninety-eight *season-free* square miles.

Our fast-moving lifestyles demand black and white absolutes: nobody has the time for shifting shades of gray.

Maybe that explains why the United States as a whole is so polarized. American culture comes from a place that doesn't have the experience of seasons, the patience for in-betweens. We're old or young, Republican or Democrat. Casual or Hardcore.

We live in a thumbs up/thumbs down world.

But there's more to life than yes or no.

01	Street Fighter IV (Arcade)
02	No More Heroes (Wii)
03	Fallout 3 (360, PS3)
04	Braid (360)
05	The World Ends With You (DS)
06	Super Street Fighter II Turbo High Definition Remix (Live, PSN)
07	Chrono Trigger (DS)
08	Gears of War 2 (360)
09	Megaman 9 (Live, PSN)
10	Mirror's Edge (360, PS3)

My favorite game of the last year was Street Fighter IV. It's a little unfair to include it, I guess, because we're talking about a (gasp!!) arcade game. But game magazines used to cover arcade releases, remember? Some used to list ARCADE as a format on their covers. You know:

GAMEAWESOME MONTHLY
ONLY the most RADICAL REVIEWS on the PLANET!
PLAYSTATION, GAME BOY, N64, PC, ARCADE!
THIS ISSUE ONLY: TOMB RAIDER CENTERFOLD

No one features arcades anymore because arcades are dead, unless you're lucky enough to live in a college town. Or in a big city. Or in a collegiate suburb of a big city … which, by the way, is where I go to play Street Fighter IV. This tiny arcade in a suburb of Los Angeles. Little strip mall place, about an hour-plus drive away. It's hell on my 1992 Celica, which has a vicious oil leak and needs new tires.

I used to drive that car to my arcade (Dennis' Place for Games, sometimes Nickel City) in Chicago to play Street Fighter III. I took more trips, later, to play Third Strike. That car knows the drill. Hell, that car was *born* when Championship Edition came out. Sure, I wasn't driving it to the arcades then, but I bet somebody was.

Street Fighter IV reminds me of why I got into gaming, every time I play it head-to-head. Balanced versus play is Pong; it's the heart of gaming. SFIV has generated a fever in me that can only be cooled by furious, jackhammer matches of Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix on Xbox Live.

Street Fighter IV smells like the corner room of the 7-11 at Foster and Ravenswood, where I stood on a milk-crate to play Chun-Li matches against the local gang kids. Street Fighter IV feels like the cold quarters in

"Every game, no matter how great, will always be gray."

my father's coat-pockets, right before I stole another handful and ran out of the house. Street Fighter IV has the rubber hum of my bike tires on the sidewalk, as I raced around the block to play another round. Street Fighter IV is nostalgia done right.

You know, Street Fighter II is probably the reason I write for a games magazine.

And Street Fighter IV is the hope that I will still enjoy playing games ten years from now.

But for all its charms, I have to be honest with it. Street Fighter IV is not a *new* game. And my adoration is not a blind, thick, graceless Thumbs Up. Though it is my favorite game of 2008, it does not encourage the passion, the life-altering love that I felt for Third Strike. It's enough of a revamp to remind me why I play. Why I write. But it's not a ten.

Maybe nothing is.

Street Fighter IV rests somewhere in-between the binaries of yes and no (though, to be honest, I often end up screaming *yes* after I play a great round). For all its pop and polish, it's hard not to be disappointed by the roster, for example. Those backgrounds? They're garish. Worse. They're downright dumb. The play isn't as technical as I'd have it, though there is a lot to exploit in the engine.

Street Fighter IV is not black or white. It's a lovely shade of gray.

Every game, no matter how great, will always be gray.

Before we move on, I'd like to mention that Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix is the best commercial *I've ever seen*. What a brilliant way to get us excited to play Street Fighter again.

"How can we get people interested in Street Fighter?" asks Capcom

"Man, I'm actually angry at the Wii. That's not good journalism."

Japan.

"Oooh, I know: Let them play Street Fighter!"

Capcom's people are some savvy sons-of-bitches.

(Though I must voice a complaint: Last week, I had zero losses, and was still ranked behind a guy who had no wins. They've got to fix that ranking system.)

No More Heroes

In to No More Heroes, huh? Now there's a mixed bag.

So, the Wii is *still* outselling everything else in the industry. I think I read a statistic that in the month of November, 2.04 million Wiis were sold world-wide, whereas something like 800,000 PS3s made it off the shelves. The Wii has already won, apparently.

But on my list of the best games of the last year, there is … one Wii game. It's a fun one, mind you. One of the best game experiences I had this year. No More Heroes is a smug celebration of gamey-things, on a console that seems determined to avoid becoming a game system. It's like the kid who asks to enroll in English boarding school because it's that much more abrasive when he shows off his tattoos.

We all know it, we all keep saying it: The Wii is not made for video-games. It's a low-def CRT board-game machine. It's an exercise accessory. It's a novelty item. Yeah, it's got de Blob. But you have to play Party Babyz *to completion* before the Wii will allow you to load any platforming titles.

Man, I'm actually angry at the Wii. That's not good journalism.

Maybe it's good journalism to admit it.

Maybe this isn't journalism.

I really hope that we finally get some actual games on the thing this year. How many months does it take for third-party developers to catch up to the staggering success of the little white weirdo? Was the release cycle of the original Nintendo Entertainment System anything like this? After Super Mario Bros came out, was there a three year period of mini-games and crossword puzzle *simulators*? Was everyone embarrassed when they went to Toys 'R Us to look for NES games?

I'm not the only one distressed by the Wii. As of February, the average Wii game score was a dismal 64%. In this industry, it translates to terrible. Though I don't subscribe to the idea of game ratings, I still have to say that's a lot of thumbs down right there. The Wii is a system of great singular achievements drowning among miserable failures. For every No More Heroes, there's fifteen hundred Game Party 2's.

In the next year, there is only one Wii game that I'm really looking forward to—Platinum Games' Mad World.

Problem is, there will be hundreds, if not *thousands*, of other terrible Wii titles released. What's worse, in our desperation to justify our purchases of the Wii, we might *buy* a few of them. Hell, at one point, I was holding WiiFit in my hands at Circuit City, staring into the abyss. As I considered picking up a copy, I suddenly felt my mind slipping out the back of my head, like an uncooked egg.

Man, that system is depressing. I would rather that console feature a limited library of near misses, than that it choked on the easy money of mini-games. I would rather squint my eyes in a world of gray titles than peer through the clear broth of Bratz Kids.

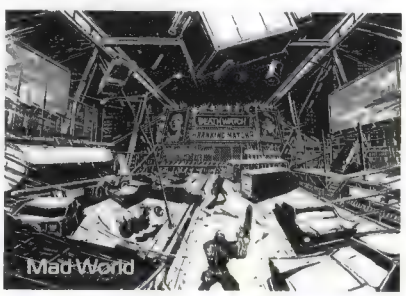
Why are the riskiest titles coming out on the systems with so much more to lose? Shouldn't the console with the install base of everyone-and-their-grandmother be witnessing a Renaissance of experimental titles?

I mean, remember the PS2? Remember God Hand? That might be the grayest game ever made. Just look at the *scores*. There are so many black and white opinions of that game that the *average* looks something like San Francisco in the spring.

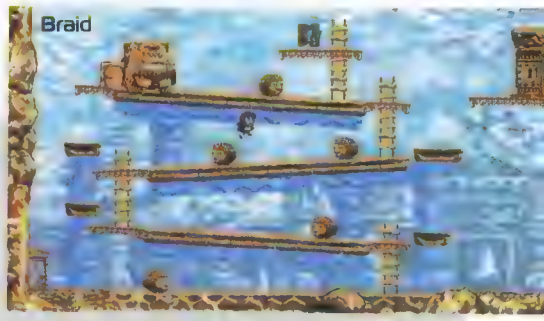
Speaking of grays …

Fallout 3 is a game drenched in gray. Saturated by it. Drowning in it. Fallout 3 is a game made of grays, both by way of its palate, and by the half-successes of its design. What a compelling, broken, half-perfect, disappointing, extraordinary mess of fun moments and frustrating choices. If Los Angeles is described in extremes of sun or rain, post-apocalyptic DC is weathered *only by the overcast conditions in-between.*

Fallout 3 is a great barometer to measure the quality of games journalism. Anyone who



Mad World



Braid

thought this game was perfect has been made binary, either by our anxious culture, or by way of their birth. No, Fallout 3 was not perfect. It's an unfinished symphony. It's a gaggle of great ideas, and some mind-bendingly bizarre ones.

I loved this game. Yet more than once, I considered putting down the controller and never playing again. It was too easy, or too hard. It was too repetitive. It was too ugly when it was not gorgeous. But most of all, it simply wasn't tight enough.

Fallout 3 was loose and overcooked. The game would have been incredible if it had been reigned in, focused. I *get* the boldness of making games so baldly large, but there's a reason we have editors in film and fiction; if we included every piece of footage, every *word* we ever wrote, then the bloated mass that would exit us would not be art. It would be refuse, unfiltered and unrefined.

But games aren't being pushed in this direction, aren't being cleansed or clarified, because we as critics aren't taking them to task. Fallout 3 was a lot of fun, but to give it a BIG TEN, a meaty THUMBS UP is to do the game, and the industry, a disservice. There was way too much wrong with Fallout 3 to simply congratulate it, and too many things right with the game to write it off. In case you haven't gathered, I think I'm defending Play Magazine right now. Games like Fallout 3 are the reason we no longer issue ratings. Ratings don't *mean* anything. Our subjective experiences with games don't need to be quantified by arbitrary scores. Was my time in Rivet City a 10, or a 9.6? Maybe it was a nine-point-six-five! We can tell you what is great about a game, for us, and where it goes awry, *for us*.

"Braid made me gasp. But Street Fighter IV always makes me shriek."

None of the games on my list this year are great.

I mean, there are great things in each of them, but there's also a lot that isn't.

Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

TWEWY is silly fluff.
But itz on my list bc you play bth scrnz @ same time.
Bc it feels like going shopping & being superficial.
The sndtrk iz gr8.
TWEWY is to RPGS what texting is 2 the novel.
That dsn't mean there's no val-u in txt messaging.
Sumtimz its wat u need 2 get an idea across.
Id rather hav 1 TWEWY than 1milln Brain Trainings.

For example, Braid. How can I talk about Braid? It's focused, erudite. But it's also heavy-handed and a little self-important. I love Braid, but it's a game that can't really be played again once you've finished it. Is replay value the mark of a great game? Is "playability"? Braid was amazing, but it was also rarely enjoyable. Braid was like Requiem for a Dream. Loved that movie, but I'll never see it again.

Braid is farther down the list than No More Heroes because NMH was more fun.

Tim's story of loss and love ranks lower than Travis' Touchdown's quest for self-satisfaction maybe because of *my* shortcomings. Because I'm immature, and enjoyed the hell out of collecting t-shirts from dumpsters.

There was more joy in swinging the Wiimote to finish off an enemy than there was in stopping time, despite the fact that the latter title has so much

more thought put into it. (Then again, maybe I'm wrong; Braid seemed awfully fun to Soulja Boy.) I know it probably irks Jonathan Blow to see his game at number four, especially behind games like Fallout 3 and Street Fighter IV; maybe he even thinks less of my opinion because of it, but … that's what happens when we are subjective. When we let our hearts in as much as our minds.

Braid made me gasp. But Street Fighter IV always makes me shriek.

The next three games on this list are not risks. They're more of the same, they're easy re-releases. But all of these games are included because they already got it *down* a long while ago. Chrono Trigger? What can you say about Chrono Trigger, other than that *it's about time*? You know, for the game to have come out for the DS, already?

There's Gears of War 2. Gears of War 2 is more Gears of War, but Gears of War is crunch incarnate. Gears of War 2 is great because it's like Gears of War! It's a little too much like Gears of War! Gears of War 2 is better than Gears of War because Gears of War 2 has a mode where you just engage the combat-play (little changed from Gears of War), to stay alive for as long as possible as an avalanche of badies come at you. What could better demonstrate that the game has noble core concepts than a mode that strips it of narrative, burns it down to the dark cinders of its mechanics … but is still infinitely enjoyable? Gears of War 2 Horde Mode is the Street Fighter of third-person action games. It's just gaming! That's why it's on my list, right there! Because it's a second bowl of Lucky Charms: This time with More Marshmallows.

Next is Megaman 9. Megaman 9 is on this list because I hope it represents a movement in games. Shuck off the graphics, and get back to the nucleus of your ideas. Megaman 9 could be something profound. I pray it is. It's the Wii concept done right—everyone can play Megaman because it's simple. Shoot. Jump.

And finally, we arrive at Mirror's Edge. Mirror's Edge is on this list for the risk, for the attempt. Like a leap of Faith, it doesn't always land. It fails all over the place, and is frustrating, but I give the game props for just trying. For trying to capture a sensation, and sometimes succeeding. Mirror's Edge is here because of the aesthetic, because I'd rather play a game that looks like this than a game that looks like a check-list of all the things that have worked in games before.

It follows these other three games because, despite its attempts, it didn't get enough right. Still, I bought it before I bought Gears of War. I wish everyone else had, too.

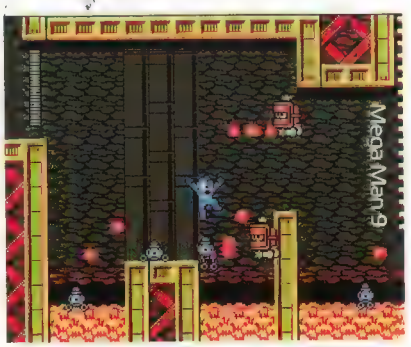
Right now, I'm staring longingly at Little Big Planet. It's not on my list. I wish the jumping in that game didn't feel so imprecise. A friend called it "floaty," and I can't think of a better word. Jumping is *very important* to me, and though you might read that as a joke, I'm dead serious. I'm staring at you like a tombstone. *Your* tombstone, and it's also got the name of your girlfriend on it. Jumping has to be done right. Loose jumps ask our brains to *wait* for a split second, while the character floats back with uncertainty. Spongy jumping gives us

> "Anyone who tells you that love is binary has never been up to their throat in it."

the time to turn off our attentions. Pile up those little pauses across the course of a game, and you've turned down the tempo on your entire title. Sure, Little Big Planet is not a break-neck actioner, but every languid leap makes us a little bit sleepier. I simply ask that you, good game designers, bring our characters back to earth with snap. In return we'll remained locked in place, ever fixed on your efforts.

Jumping is very, very important. Megaman might be great *because* of his jump.

You know what? Grand Theft Auto IV has terrible jumps. I won't say much more about it.



Well, I'll also add that game was a little boring. Maybe it was that I cared too much about Niko. I couldn't have fun with him. I didn't want to drive him off a building in a car (the true joy of Grand Theft Autos previous) because he looked so *sad*. It was not fun to keep hurting Niko. On the other hand, the story wasn't gripping enough to protect him. So, I guess it was just Pretty Good Theft Auto. But we either needed to love Niko more, or he needed to be slightly more disposable.

That may or may not be a joke.

Finally, Left 4 Dead is only as good as the people you play with. It will be an incredible game when there's a screening process for Xbox Live members.

I'm sitting on an airplane now, crunched in-between the seats of lower economy class. Actually, I think I'm in baggage. Maybe not—there is a window here.

We've had a lot of rain these last few days in Los Angeles, and the wings of my American Airlines flight are cutting through a bready layer of clouds. It's suddenly freezing in California, of course, and I'm on my way to San Francisco to play more of Resident Evil 5 for a preview that will be somewhere else in this issue.

Resident Evil 5 is one of my most anticipated games of 2009, not just because of the game's pedigree, but also because it might be the first real controversy of the gaming world. Grand Theft Auto's hooker-bashing has nothing on the outbreak metaphors of RE5. Watching those trailers for the game again, as I did last night, it's hard not to imagine seeing the entire script as a callous deconstruction of AIDS and poverty in Africa. Then again, it might just be a zombie game, who knows. I won't go into it with loaded intentions. I'd rather play a game than read into one.

Street Fighter IV will probably top my list again next year, when it arrives for home systems. I know that's not fair, but my enjoyment of the game is worth at least two years. Hell, I gave Third Strike a decade.

Other games that I can't help but get excited about include Final Fantasy XIII (assuming it ever arrives), the aforementioned Mad World, Uncharted 2, Heavy Rain, Cave Story on Virtual Console, and Dragon Quest IX. I bet some of these games will be great. But don't let anyone tell you they're flawless. There will be moments of "ten" just as there will be mis-steps that trip along like "two" or "three."

See, as much as we love video games, we can't be expected to quantify them. There's no thumbs up or thumbs down to this passion, or to any passion. Games may be programmed in complicated sets of yes and no instructions, but our appreciation of games can't be distilled into such facile terms. Affection is analogue. It's indescribable; choleric and impulsive, yet flushed with shades of gray. Anyone who tells you that love is binary has never been up to their throat in it. And despite what California says— in film, in music, and in gaming—love is cloudier than simple rain or sun.

Eric L. Patterson
Associate Editor

A Year Of Dual Screens and Kung-fu Queens

I'm afraid that if you're expecting these next four pages to give you expert analysis on the state of gaming during this past year, you'll have to instead get your fill from the other editors who have helped round out this section. The truth is, beyond what I play thanks to, well, Play, I'm so far behind when it comes to certain games that I've still got a shelf filled with sealed PS2 releases that continue to wait for my attention. Oh sure, I've played a number of the year's big titles, but then you'd have moments where I'd say things like "the Mirror's Edge demo was an enthralling ten minutes" or "Fallout 3 provides an absolutely badical gameplay experience from what I've seen in the gameplay trailers."

Instead, what I'd rather do is sit down and have a chat about some of the things I learned about gaming—and myself—over the course of 2008.

Lesson #1 Multiplayer indeed rocks my socks

I think I really enjoyed Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, but the honest truth is, I'm actually not too sure. I remember getting a respectable way through the single-player storyline, but what thrilled me for far longer was seeing how much chaos I could cause in the game's world and how it would react to my dirty deeds. The city itself, not the tale of one man making his way through the criminal underworld, was Vice City's draw for me, and I imagined all the possibilities such potential could provide had the game allowed for some level of multiplayer.

When I stood in line with a close friend at midnight to pick up Grand Theft Auto IV, I actually wasn't giving much thought to the now-included list of online options. A funny thing happened a short time later, however: that same friend convinced me to jump into multiplayer the next day, and it would then be a good month or so before I even touched the single player side of the game again. What I found was that, for me, Grand Theft Auto IV–a game that was an epic single-player experience with a decent multiplayer aspect along for the ride–was instead an epic multiplayer experience with a decent singe-player aspect along for the ride. I haven't helped Niko reach the end of his journey yet, and truth be told, I'm not sure I have much interest in doing so at this point. The multiplayer, however; it is an experience that is as exciting and enthralling for me today as it was on day one, and was only disappointing to me because it provided no Halo 3-esque "theater" aspect so that I could record and re-watch all of the ridiculous situations that have taken place over the course of the countless online sessions I've been a part of.

Many out there—including at least a few folks here at Play—consider it heresy to expect a majority of games to include some sort of multiplayer aspect. Don't misunderstand me: I'd never want to see a fabulous single-player game suffer by forcing it to accommodate a tacked-on competitive mode. What I will say, however, is that there are more games out there that could provide an excellent multiplayer experience than currently are doing so, and taking the time to give these games more option for how (and by whom) they are played is not something to be feared or avoided.

"Many out there . . . consider it heresy to expect a majority of games to include some sort of multiplayer aspect."

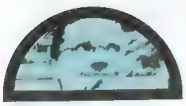
Lesson #2 My name is Eric, and I love the DS

I purchased my first DS (one of the original silver ones) for one reason, and one reason only: a close friend of mine from Japan had gotten a job at Nintendo, the first game she ended up being a part of was WarioWare Touched, and I wanted to support her by buying (and playing) her project. I really had little expectation for Nintendo's peculiar dual-screened gadget, and at best hoped there might end up being a couple other interesting games released for it so that I wouldn't feel like I had wasted my money.

As I type this, three DSs sit here in my apartment, that old silver model not being one of them. I started doing a lot of DS coverage for Play because it's an easy platform to review pre-release games on, and I have to admit that at first, I was still at the point where the system was interesting but "quaint." Now, we're three years later, and over the course of 2008 I've come to an amazing conclusion: the DS, for me, is the new NES.

What does that mean? Obviously there have been other gaming platforms since the NES that have had huge impacts, most notably the PS2. But there's this certain something that the DS has that nothing since the NES has had for me: a feeling of nostalgia, of simpler times, of games that weren't outrageously complex with Hollywood-level budgets yet still held an amazing level of magic and mystique. As utterly thrilled as I am with the feats of technological and narrative advancement that I receive via my PS3 or Xbox 360, that kid in me that fell in love with video games so long ago has come to adore the DS and its quirky, accessible, and yes, even at times quaint library of games. At once, it provides me with the excitement of new, undiscovered lands, while wrapping me in the warm blanket of security and familiarity. I didn't start gaming on the NES, but it was the console where I became a gamer. Now, and especially this year (thanks to some ridiculously good releases), with DS in hand, I feel like I've returned home again.

"There's this certain something that the DS has that nothing since the NES has had for me: a feeling of nostalgia."



Eric L. Patterson
Associate Editor

Completely Nonsensical Awards 2008 Edition

It really wouldn't be proper to do a 2008 wrap-up without some sort of fancy doling out of awards, so now I present to you the first-annual "Shidoshi's Super Doki Doki Hyper Pretty Excellent Awards: ~Our Fight Is Not Alone~ Black Label Edition" ceremonies.

Freshest New Face in Gaming

Winner
Chie Satonaka from Persona 4

Atlus has always been known for creating characters that are as interesting and unique as they are stylish, but the ball was really hit out of the park (as the kids say) with Persona 4's Chie. She stands tall not only as a fabulous example of a female video game character one can be proud of, but also as a character that can be a strong and formidable hero without the need of being saddled with any sort of emotional or mental baggage. My only heartbreak when it comes to Chie is that, sadly, her first appearance will most likely also be her last.

Best Proof That Online Support Can Revive Older Games

Winner
Samurai Shodown II (XBLA)

Granted, I wouldn't exactly say that a timeless classic like SamSho2 really needs "reviving." I cannot deny, however, the fact that the game coming out for Xbox Live Arcade completely re-ignited my love for SNK's 2D combat masterpiece. A fighting game is only as good as your competition, and once again having the opportunity to bust up some fools with my Charlotte was one of my favorite experiences of the past year.

Worst Announced Name for an Upcoming Release

Winner
Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection (PS3, 360)

I have two problems with the title given to the North American release of Sega's very promising upcoming game collection. First, it will include a (small) selection of Master System and arcade games, so why make it sound limited to the Genesis? Second, why was this named after Sonic when over 90 percent of the games have nothing to do with him?

Best Video Game Cover Art

Winner
Mega Man 9 (WiiWare, PSN, XBLA)

As if Capcom did not exude enough awesomeness when making what was basically a brand new NES title in the year 2008, they made sure to keep things old school by producing a "so bad it's good" piece of cover artwork for the game that perfectly emulated box art from the 8-bit era. Seeing the image Capcom put together for the Blue Bomber's latest adventures almost made me miss the days when every game's cover was a bizarre collage of elements that you never, ever saw during gameplay. Almost.

Worst Game Accessories

Winner
Wii Fit

No, I'm not talking about the Wii Balance Board, I have one, and it's pretty nifty. I'm instead talking about the sea of Wii Fit "companion" items that I see whenever browsing a store's Wii isle. A mat that I could get for a tenth of the price in another part of the store? Wii Fit water bottles, complete with Wii Fit water bottle holders? Sweatbands? Gym bags? Freakin' socks?

Biggest Waste of My Time

Winner
Soul Calibur IV (PS3, 360)

Seriously Namco, here's what I want to do: I want to turn Soul Calibur IV on, have fun making some characters, then go online and play against my friends. I don't want to spend hours and hours in the single-player game having to unlock items, and then spend even more time earning money to buy those items. Buying outfit pieces, fine, but don't make me unlock the damn things first: have them all available for purchase and let me pick what I want right from the start. To all of you companies out there: stop punishing those of us who buy some games only for the multiplayer.

Nine Things I Want From Video Gaming in '09 (but aren't holding my breath for)

01 Microsoft fixes the Xbox 360's d-pad. The major hardware issues are over and you've got a brand new user interface in place. Now it's time to once and for all fix that little (big) flaw with your otherwise stellar controller.

02 Nintendo releases more than one Virtual Console title per week in the United States. At the rate we're going now, I'll get the games I'm waiting for around the time I become a grandfather. Oh, and while I don't care so much, NOA might also throw those poor Mother fans a bone.

03 Last Blade 1 & 2 make their way to Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network. I'd also ask for Mark of the Wolves, but I'm not greedy.

04 We finally get a track listing for the Japanese version of Rock Band, and I see the names Go!Go! 7188, Asian Kung-Fu Generation, Tsukiko Amano, and Sonim on it.

05 SCEA takes a cue from their Japanese counterparts and announces that every first party PSP title released in 2009 with also be available as a digital download. Then, every third party announces the same thing. Then, every already-released PSP title also goes digital. Seriously, I just don't want to deal with these UMDs anymore.

06 Nintendo gets behind the DSi Ware store the way Apple has gone all out with their iPhone/iPod Apps store. You think the DS is hot stuff now, Nintendo? Get a bunch of big (and small) software developers on board to push the DSi in new and exciting ways. How much of a no-brainer is it to have things like an e-mail reader, address book, IM client, or calculator on the DS, for example?

07 SNK shocks me by not only revealing that Mai actually **is** in KOF XII, but that she has her flaming upper back to boot. As a consolation prize: Miss Valentine unlockable in RE5.

08 The plague of random battles is once and for all removed from the Earth when it comes to RPGs (except for select situations where a title is trying to emulate classic gameplay, such as Etrian Odyssey), and A.I.-controlled party members become more plentiful as well as much smarter.

09 An online zombie survival game (set in a city the size of GTAIV) where the point is simply to see how long you can live. Hunt for food and supplies, battle zombies, meet up with other players and either work as a team or screw them over for your own benefit. Left 4 Dead is a good start, but it just makes me hungry for more.

Phantasy Star 0

King of Fighters XII

Games I'm Looking Forward to in '09 (in no order but alphabetical)

- Alan Wake (360)
- Heavy Rain (PS3)
- I Am Alive (PS3)
- King of Fighters XII (PS3)
- King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match (XBLA)
- Phantasy Star 0 (NDS)
- Scribblenauts (NDS)
- Star Ocean: The Last Hope (360)
- Uncharted 2 (PS3)

Last Blade

Nick Des Barres
Japanese Correspondent

Last year, I wrote about how I finally learned to accept—perhaps even love—Western console games. For the greater part of my life, I had gravitated exclusively to Japanese titles, drawn by their finely honed gameplay, exotic aesthetics, and unabashedly melodic music. They were, and remain, a large part of why I currently live in the country. Sadly, 2008 was a crushing disappointment for even the hardiest of Japanese gaming aficionados: I can count the number of true Game of the Year contenders from this country on one finger. It's lucky I embraced Western gaming when I did.

I enjoyed more Western games this year than Japanese, and the very notion of that rattles me to my core. To a life-long Eastern gaming snob, the concept is deeply sobering. Metal Gear Solid 4 was by far the best game of 2008, a shining masterpiece to join the all-time pantheon... yet the best I can say about every other major Japanese game this year is: "Good, but not great." The market reflects this, as well—when was the last time you saw a non-Nintendo Japanese game on the sales charts? Oh yeah, back in June, with that li'l ol' Tactical Espionage Action number.

The Eastern and Western game markets have never been so sharply divided as they were in 2008. Other than Nintendo's perennial Wii crowd-pleasers (Mario Kart, WiiFit, and WiiPlay, none of which are relevant to me), there is virtually no overlap in popular games. Japan seems content to withdraw into an insular bubble of casual handheld pap, shunning console games that don't come with random chunks of white, injection-molded plastic. This, clearly, is a less than ideal state of affairs.

It seems that the big boys—with the exception of Kojima Productions, and, perhaps, Capcom—simply cannot hang with Western technology, game design, and budgets. But at the other end of the spectrum, a curious thing happened in 2008: Niche B- and C-level games thrived. Although most may never see release outside of Japan, these shooters, text adventure games, and genre RPGs provided comfort food between the Little Big Planets and Fallout 3s. The fatalists will tell you Japanese gaming is doomed to international irrelevance, but I hope the country will continue to be productive in such small-scale genres for years to come.

I enjoyed more Western games this year than Japanese, and the very notion of that rattles me to my core. To a life-long Eastern gaming snob, the concept is deeply sobering.

Top 10
Japanese-Developed Games of 2008 (Released Worldwide)

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots
PS3 Konami/Kojima Productions

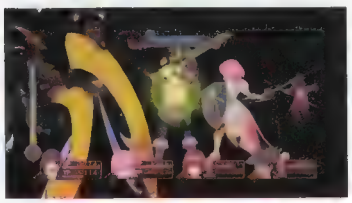
I struggled to put into words my feelings about Metal Gear Solid 4 when I wrote my review, and I struggle even harder now. In many ways, it is the perfect distillation of narrative-based gaming, the oft-promised but never delivered "game/cinema convergence" made real. No other game this year provided me with a more essential experience.

Valkyria Chronicles
PS3 Sega

Criminally ignored at retail, Valkyria Chronicles is a brilliant grounds-up reimagining of the tired Japanese strategy RPG concept with stunning pastel visuals, an unconventional setting, and a captivating story. In any other year, it would have been my top pick for best Japanese-developed game.

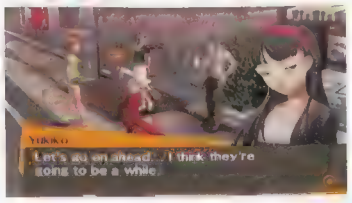
Tales of Vesperia
360 Namco Bandai/Namco Tales Studio

This was the year JRPGs died, flatlining at retail and culling monstrously derisive reviews in the press. What a shame, when games like this are being made: Enchanting, lengthy, and *thoroughly* Japanese, Tales of Vesperia was the real-world manifestation of the future adventures I dreamed about as a fantasy JRPG-addicted youth.



Persona 4
PS2 Atlus

Super stylish Persona 4 is the venerable PlayStation 2's swan song, and for a platform that graced us with so many legendary JRPGs, who can imagine a better one? Striking just the right balance between comfortable familiarity and bold genre futurism—and with a jaw-crackingly superb localization to boot—P4 is the year's other can't-miss JRPG.



Crisis Core - Final Fantasy VII

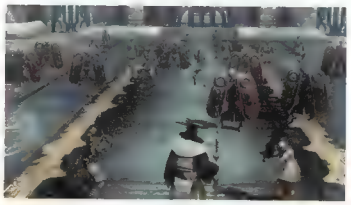
PSP Square Enix

Crisis Core may have sacrificed drama for gameplay, but oh, what drama it was. It deserves inclusion on this list simply by virtue of being the most ambitious handheld game ever made, and doubly so for erasing the unfortunate taint the Compilation of Final Fantasy VII acquired after Advent Children and Dirge of Cerberus.

Lost Odyssey

360 Microsoft/Mistwalker/feelplus+

Lost Odyssey was a valiant effort at emulating a numbered Final Fantasy's ludicrous pomp and over-the-top grandeur, but beautiful vistas and solid gameplay alone do not a masterpiece make. A story that collapsed under its own weight prevented Hironobu Sakaguchi's very, very expensive game from being higher on this list.



Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Wii Nintendo/GameArts

By all rights, Super Smash Bros. Brawl should have been much higher on this list. Unfortunately, its sensationalistic one-new-feature-a-day marketing created impossible expectations, making Brawl appear to be much more than it actually was. In the end, it was just a gussied-up Smash Bros.—nothing to snicker at, but no Second Coming, either.

The World Ends With You

NDS Square Enix/Jupiter

Chic design, incredible music, and an almost Nintendo-like understanding of what to do with two screens and a stylus made for the year's best Nintendo DS game. Part RPG, part action, and part rhythm game, The World Ends With You proved that oft-maligned Square Enix designer Tetsuya Nomura could succeed beyond the Final Fantasy and Kingdom Hearts franchises.

Runners Up

Dragon Quest IV, Final Fantasy IV, Devil May Cry 4, Ninja Gaiden II, SIREN: Blood Curse, Soulcalibur IV, Battle Fantasia, Guilty Gear 2: Overture

The Last Remnant

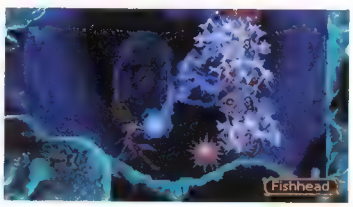
360 Square Enix

Square Enix's first "next gen" outing got excoriated in the enthusiast press, for no discernible reason. Sure, it may have a few technical problems. It's also a superb, nonlinear RPG that innovates in several key areas critics are so quick to complain about. When did it become so fashionable to hate on JRPGs, anyway?

Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia

NDS Konami

Some argue that Koji "IGA" Igarashi's "Metroidvania" schtick has long worn out its welcome. I disagree: With his 2-D Castlevanias, you know exactly what you're going to get, and it's going to be solid as a rock. As comforting as Mom's macaroni and cheese.



Top 20 Japanese-Developed Games of 2008 (Japan Only)

Note: This list includes only software with no announced American release date. Thus, games announced for a 2009 release in the West such as Dragon Quest V, Valkyrie Profile: Covenant of the Plume, Rhythm Heaven Gold, AFRIKA, Phantasy Star Portable, Avalon Code, and Klonoa do not appear.

Ryu ga Gotoku Kenzan!

PS3 Sega

Hey Sega, can you tell me why this eminently satisfying samurai swashbuckler isn't being localized? "The Yakuza games failed in the West" is not a valid excuse. Thanks.

428

Wii Sega/Chunsoft

Chunsoft's text adventure 428 (read it as "Shibuya" if you want to sound cool) proved that games don't need a whole lot of flash to be absolutely *gripping*... as long as the narrative is right.

Tatsunoko VS. Capcom: Cross Generation of Heroes

Wii Capcom/Bing

Rights issues will probably prevent the latest—and long overdue—entry in Capcom's VS. series of fighting games from ever seeing American release. That sucks, because it's just as awesome as you'd expect it to be.

Sigma Harmonics

NDS Square Enix/Think Garage

Every bit the worthy followup to The World Ends With You, Square Enix's time travel murder mystery reminded me that the DS is still ripe for third party innovations.

Nick Des Barres
Japanese Correspondent

Fatal Frame IV

Wii Nintendo/Tecmo/Grasshopper Manufacture

Undoubtedly the most frightening game this year, equipped with rad Wiimote control, and doing its series legacy no dishonor, Fatal Frame IV isn't coming to the US because... why?

Sora no Kiseki the 3rd

PSP Falcom

Falcom's series of serial PSP RPGs continued to kick ass this year, providing a multi-UMD, console-worthy experience. I'll say it again: Someone please license all three and release them as a 5-disc set.

Infinite Loop

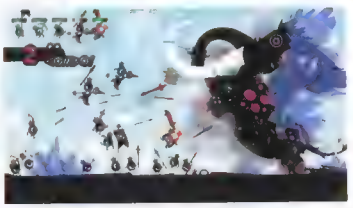
PSP NIS

In the sea of text adventure muck Japan wades through, it takes a hell of a lot to stand out. NIS' engrossing Infinite Loop did it with gorgeous animation and a thought-provoking circular narrative structure.

Patapon 2: Donchaka

PSP Sony/Pyramid

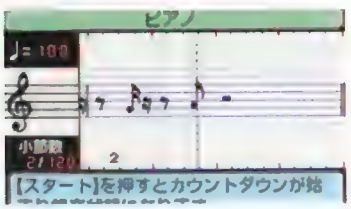
Pata, pata, pata, pon. Pon, pon, pata, pon. Everything that kept you playing the original rhythm/RPG hybrid until the wee hours, only worse. Much, much worse.



Daigasso! Band Bros. DX

NDS Nintendo

Perhaps Nintendo feels Band Bros. is just too complicated to foist on dumb Americans: A fabulous rhythm game, but also a fully-featured MIDI composition tool. It would blow our simple minds.



Otomedius G

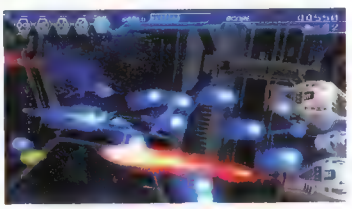
360 Konami

Konami's hallowed Gradius series got a sparkling makeover in the form of... *moe* anime girls? For real, son. The visuals may be 21st century, but the gameplay is decidedly 20th.

Thunderforce VI

PS2 Sega

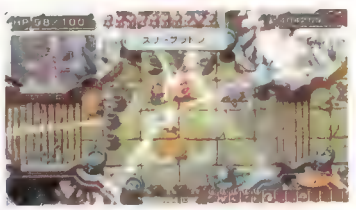
Thunderforce VI was one of those mythic games that never was, but thanks to a fair amount of legal maneuvering, it finally happened. That particular late 80s/early 90s gleaming metal shooter aesthetic has never been so beautiful.



Zwei!!

PSP Falcom

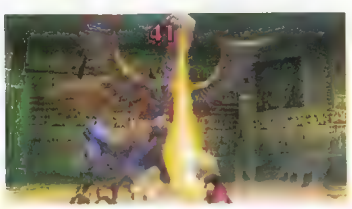
Zwei!! maybe be a port of a seven year old PC game, but its cooperative gameplay is a perfect match for Wi-Fi linked PSPs. Falcom doesn't know how to make a bad game; this much-loved action RPG is no exception.



Winds of the Nostalgeo

NDS Tecmo/RED

RED's Winds of the Nostalgeo was originally planned for the PSone/Saturn generation more than a decade ago, and it shows. In the case of this winsomely innocent JRPG throwback, that's a good thing.



Knights in the Nightmare

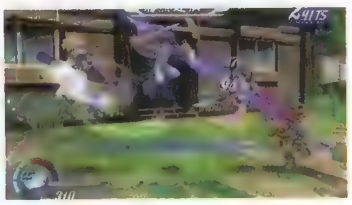
NDS Sting

Little developer Sting has never failed to please with its portable SRPG experiences, and Knights in the Nightmare marks its most ambitious yet. Come on, Atlus, you know you want to.

Tales of Destiny Director's Cut

PS2 Bandai Namco/Namco Tales Studio

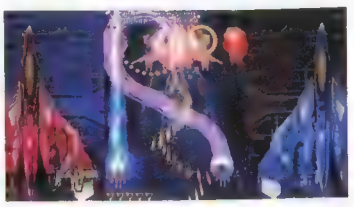
This grounds-up remake of the most successful Tales game in history exemplified everything that makes the series great: Endearing characters, a lovely primary-colored world, and scorching battles.



Raiden IV

360 Moss

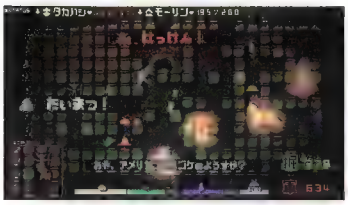
The Xbox 360 has become the last bastion for 2-D shooters, and though I might prefer them to be Live! downloadable games, it's hard to complain when the action is as blistering as Raiden IV's.



You Sure Are Uppity For a Hero or 2

PSP Sony/Acquire

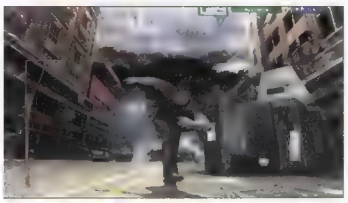
Sony and Acquire's clever reverse RPG throwback—you play as the "last boss", chucking traps at the "hero"—was more of an expansion pack that a true sequel, but still tons of fun.



Disaster: Day of Crisis

Wii Nintendo/Monolith

Monolith's Disaster: Just another example of Nintendo's lazy attitude towards localization. You'd think a solid action adventure game like this was made with the American market in mind, wouldn't you?



Soma Bringer

NDS Nintendo/Monolith

...And it continues. Monolith got quite the raw deal this year; not even their thoroughly enjoyable multi-player action RPG with a lovely Yasunori Mitsuda soundtrack passed Nintendo's muster.

The iDOLM@STER Live For You!

360 Bandai Namco/iM@S Project

The "sequel" to last year's original iDOLM@STER may have been little more than a tool to sell scads of DLC costumes and songs, but those cel-shaded songstresses are just so *amusing*!

Question Marks

Significant 2008 games not yet released as of press time:

Dissidia Final Fantasy, Suikoden Tierkreis, Tales of Hearts, White Knight Story, Phantasy Star Zero

The Top 10 Japanese-Developed Games of 2008 (Released Worldwide)

Last year I talked about how DLC games gave me hope. This year, that hope blossomed into joy a degree or two beyond even my most fevered imaginings. Witness 2008's bounty, ranging from the gobsmackingly new (Braid, World of Goo), to the charmingly familiar (Bionic Commando Rearmed, Castle Crashers), to full packaged game quality (SIREN, Wipeout HD).

A longstanding problem exists with independent short films: No matter how wonderful the works may be, there exist no mainstream venues for people to see them. DLC leapfrogs that roadblock entirely, bringing indie game ideas direct to the fore, always accessible and (usually) always affordable. Rock on, you crazy independent pioneers. We'll be sure to remember your names, because I have a feeling we'll begin seeing them attached to much larger projects in the years to come.

1 **Braid**
Microsoft/Number None
Xbox Live Arcade

2 **Wipeout HD**
Sony Computer Entertainment Liverpool Studio
PSN

3 **SIREN: Blood Curse**
Sony Computer Entertainment Japan Studio
PSN

4 **World of Goo**
2D Boy
WiiWare

5 **Ikaruga**
Treasure
Xbox Live Arcade

6 **Castle Crashers**
The Behemoth
Xbox Live Arcade

7 **Rez HD**
Q? Entertainment
Xbox Live Arcade

8 **Bionic Commando**
Capcom/Grin
Xbox Live Arcade

9 **Omega Five**
Natsume
Xbox Live Arcade

10 **Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: My Life As A King**
Square Enix
WiiWare

Runners Up: Lost Winds, Lumines Supernova, Meteos Wars, Söldner-X: Himmelsstürmer, PixelJunk Eden, Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD

Nick Des Barres
Japanese Correspondent

The Top 10 Most Awesome Japanese Game Titles of 2008

Note: All non-English titles below are faithfully translated from the Japanese. Yes, these are real games!

Japanese games have never been known for their particularly pithy titles, but 2008 was a *true* banner year for fans of those idiosyncratically Nipponese names we all know and love. Think back to some past winners... "Linkle Liver Story", for instance, or perhaps "Love Super Big Brother". In our estimation, this year's crop of supremely awesome titles trumps even the most storied games of olde. See for yourself below.

1. 12RIVEN -the criminal of integral-
Kid/SDR Project
PlayStation 2

2. Absolute Dainty Children DS: The 4th Children
Konami
Nintendo DS

3. You Be the Master, I'll Be the Butler ~A Diary of Servitude~
Minato Station
PlayStation 2

4. Terminal Girl Fantasy Alicematic ~Apocalypse~
Russel Cure
PlayStation 2

5. Hanayoi Romanesque Love and Sadness: It Was an Aria for You
Marvelous
PlayStation 2

6. The Female High School Student Runs! Psychic Puzzle Academy
Success
Nintendo DS

7. After School, We Examine Silver
Dimple
PlayStation 2

8. Duel Love: A Maiden Who Loves is the Goddess of Victory
Bandai Namco
Nintendo DS

9. Jalopy Romance Great Swashbuckler Bumpy Trot Vehicle Battle Tournament
Irem
PSP

10. English of the Dead: Zombie-Style English Ability Resuscitation Technique
Sega
Nintendo DS

The 15 Least Necessary Japanese Games of 2008

And now, the final and most rewarding part of my Year in Review. I present The Least Necessary Japanese Games of 2008... my own personal Golden Raspberry Awards. It is here I get to mock, ridicule, and *scoff* at the massive waste of talent and plastic the below "games" represent. It's not as if this sort of software even makes any money: With one exception, none of the below 15 titles moved more than 5,000 units. Quite simply, they should not exist. Scan the list below and see if you find yourself agreeing with me.

1. Big Brother Hiromichi's Exercise Navigator for Parent and Child: Building Vitality and Physical Affection Between Families
Dorasu
Nintendo DS

2. Let's Begin! Asset Management DS
Supervised by the Strategic Business Innovator Group
Broadmedia
Nintendo DS

3. What If!? I'm Selected for Jury Duty...
Takara Tomy
Nintendo DS

4. Hula Wii: Beauty and Health Begins With Hula Dancing!
Milestone
Wii

5. Feminine Dignity Cram School DS ~Powerful, Gentle, Beautiful~ Supervised by Mariko Bando
PHP Laboratories
Nintendo DS

6. Revive Your Look, Revive Yourself: Fashion Coordination Training for Adults
Success
Nintendo DS

7. The Popular Life for Men Who Can Make it Happen: Daytime Popularity Lecture Chapter Supervised by Weekly SPA!
Takara Tomy
Nintendo DS

8. The Popular Life for Men Who Can Make it Happen: Nighttime Popularity Real-Life Application Chapter Supervised by Weekly SPA!
Takara Tomy
Nintendo DS

9. WiiMusic
Nintendo
Wii

10. Cosmetic * Paradise ~The Miracle of Makeup~
Global A Entertainment
Nintendo DS

11. Ambidexterity Exercises ~The Right Hand is for Theorizing, The Left Hand is for Sensitivity~
Cyberfront
Nintendo DS

12. Rapid Child-Rearing DS: Let's Play With Your Baby! Supervised by Professor Kazuo Hiraki of Tokyo University
Marvelous
Nintendo DS

13. DS Brain Training for Infants: Rapidly Expand Their Ability to Think!
ShoPro
Nintendo DS

14. Reading for Everyone: Masterpieces & Mysteries & Horror & Literature
Dorasu
PSP

15. Solve 'Em in a Flash! Indian Style Arithmetic Drills DS: Mental Computation You'll Want To Brag About Supervised by Professor Niyanta Deshpande
MegaHouse
Nintendo DS

THE GIRLS ARE HERE!

Be sure to order these previous volumes to complete your collection.

They'll be gone soon!

(Attack of the Handhelds)
the best in portable gaming 2008

INTRODUCTION

Who says you can't take it with you?

The big 3 consoles may get all the buzz, but overall the handheld market continues to dominate hardware and software sales in both the US and Japan. This past November (US), Sony sold 421,000 PSPs versus 378,000 PS3s, even after a year where just about every 3rd party (and Sony themselves aside from releasing new models and bundles) all but ignored the platform. If not for Square Enix and a few key first-party efforts, the most powerful handheld in the world would be all but obsolete. Meanwhile, the DS continues to dominate the known universe—in the US alone Nintendo sold 1.57 million units in November, more than the PS2, PS3, and PSP combined by over 500,000 and nearly double the Xbox 360's respectable 836,000 November bid. Sure handhelds are more affordable, but one thing is crystal clear—American gamers don't leave home without one.

(Best Action Adventure)

God of War: Chains of Olympus
PSP / Ready at Dawn / SCEA

Runner Up
Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword
NDS / Team Ninja / Tecmo

(Best Action Platforming)

Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia
NDS / Konami / Konami

Runners up
Secret Agent Clank
PSP / High Impact / SCEA

Kirby Super Star Ultra
NDS / Hal / Nintendo

(Best Action RPG)

The World Ends With You
NDS / Jupiter Corp.. / Square Enix

Runners Up
Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII
PSP / Square Enix / Square Enix

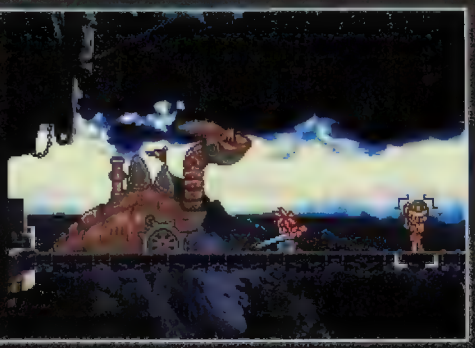
Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Ring of Fates
NDS / Square Enix / Square Enix

(Best RPG)

Chrono Trigger
NDS / Square Enix / Square Enix

Runners Up
Final Fantasy IV
NDS / Matrix Software / Square Enix

Dragon Quest IV: Chapters of the Chosen
NDS / ArtePiazza / Square Enix



(Best Strategy)

Advance Wars: Days of Ruin
NDS / Intelligent Systems / Nintendo

Runners Up
Disgaea DS
NDS / Nippon Ichi Soft. / NIS America

Age of Empires: Mythologies
NDS / Griptonite Games / THQ

(Best Fighting)

Bleach: Dark Souls
NDS / Treasure / Sega

Runners Up
Naruto Ultimate Ninja Heroes 2 The Phantom Fortress
PSP / CyberConnect 2 / Namco Bandai

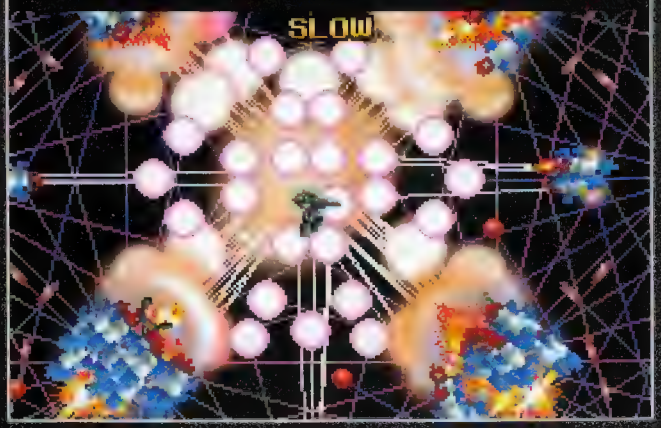
The King of Fighters Collection ~The Orochi Saga~
PSP / SNK Playmore / SNK Playmore

(Best Shooting)

Bangai-O Spirits
NDS / Treasure / D3

Runners Up
Metal Slug 7
NDS / SNK Playmore / Ignition Entertainment

Little Red Riding Hood's Zombie BBQ
NDS / EnjoyUp / Destineer



[Best Rhythm]

Guitar Hero On Tour: Decades

NDS / Vicarious Visions / Activision

Runners Up

Korg DS-10 Synthesizer
NDS / AQ Interactive / XSEED

Ultimate Band
NDS / Fall Line Studios / Disney Int.

[Best Puzzle]

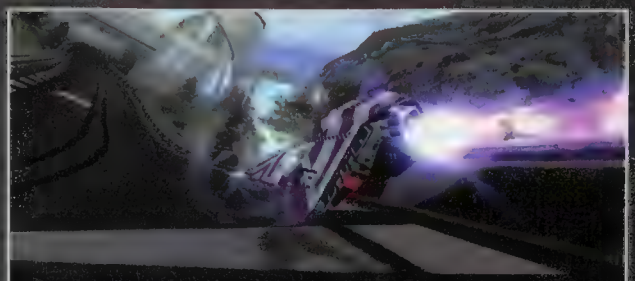
Professor Layton and the Curious Village

NDS / Level-5 / Nintendo

Runners Up

Soul Bubbles
NDS / Mekensleep / Eidos Interactive

echochrome
PSP / Game Yaruoze / SCEA



[Best Racing]

WipEout Pulse

PSP / Sony Studio Liverpool / SCEA

Runners Up

FlatOut: Head On
PSP / Bugbear Entertainment / Empire Interactive

Midnight Club LA Remix
PSP / Rockstar London / Rockstar Games

[Best Cartoon / Anime Based]

Bleach: Dark Souls

NDS / Treasure / Sega

Runner Up

Tak: Mojo Mistake
NDS / Altron / THQ

[Best Original Game: NDS]

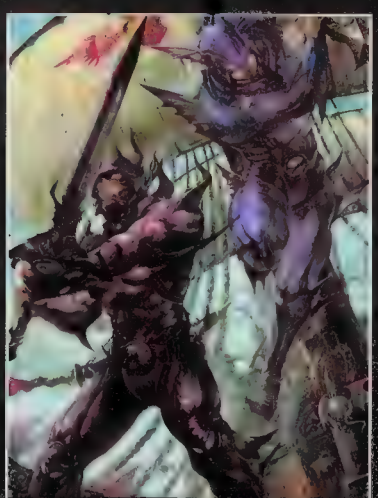
The World Ends With You

NDS / Jupiter Corp. / Square Enix

[Best Original Game: PSP]

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

PSP / Square Enix / Square Enix



[Best Remake / Re-release]

Tie

Chrono Trigger

NDS / Square Enix / Square Enix

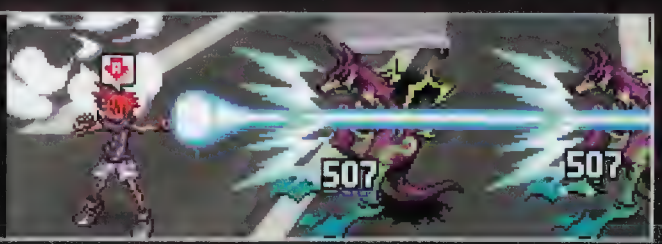
Final Fantasy IV

NDS / Matrix Software / Square Enix

[Most Innovative Handheld Game of 2008]

The World Ends With You

NDS / Jupiter Corp. / Square Enix



{ Attack of the Handhelds }

the best in portable gaming 2008

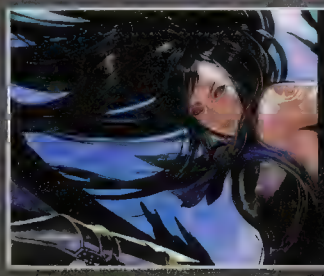
2008 Year in Review

{ Best New Character: Male }

Zack

(Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII)

PSP / Square Enix / Square Enix



{ Best New Character: Female }

Shanoa

(Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia)

NDS / Konami / Konami

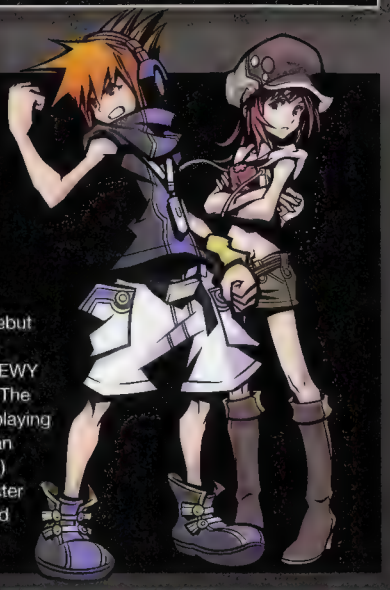
EDITOR'S PICK

DAVE HALVERSON

Best of '08

The World Ends With You

As much as I dug Kratos' raging PSP debut and another pristine Castlevania—this time with a beautiful female lead—TWEWY crawled up inside me and took up residence. The whole imminent death/reaper scenario motif playing out in and around the Shibuya District of Japan was just too fresh and ultra sticky (that music!) to put down. Add some of the best 2D character design I've seen this decade (or any other) and the choice is clear.



MATT CABRAL

Best of '08

God of War: Chains of Olympus

The PSP finally achieved its portable-powerhouse potential with the release of Kratos' console quality effort. Sure, other titles had already proven Sony's slick hand-held could hold its own in Nintendo's domain, but the Athenian ass-kicker's on-the-go debut went a step further, delivering not just a top-notch hand-held game, but one that could stand sandaled toe-to-sandaled toe with its console counterparts; Chains of Olympus' eye-searing presentation, screen-filling foes, intuitive controls (finally, it didn't matter the PSP had only one analog stick), and epic action essentially put a PS2 in the palm of our hands.

EDITOR'S PICK

HEATHER ANNE CAMPBELL

Best of '08

Chrono Trigger DS

I love The World Ends With You, I really do. But the game, for all its successes, just won't have the longevity that Chrono Trigger already has. I'm thinking of the game I'll still be playing ten years from now ... and I'm positive, that in 2018, I'll still be booting up the time-traveling saga of Chrono and friends. You know, when we're swallowing our game systems and seeing the stories in our dreams. Or is the PS9 still a few years off?

EDITOR'S PICK

EDITOR'S PICK

ERIC L. PATTERSON

Best of '08

Professor Layton and the Curious Village

The portable hits this year were plentiful, but I really have to give my nod to the Professor, who brought back the notion that not only can mentally-challenging games be full of personality and charm, but also, you know, mentally challenging.

Either you get it.

As Seen on The Tonight Show and Conan O'Brien

Or you don't.

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development update | System: PC, Xbox 360 | Developer: 8monkey Labs | Publisher: Phantom EFX | Available: Q2 2009

Darkest of Days

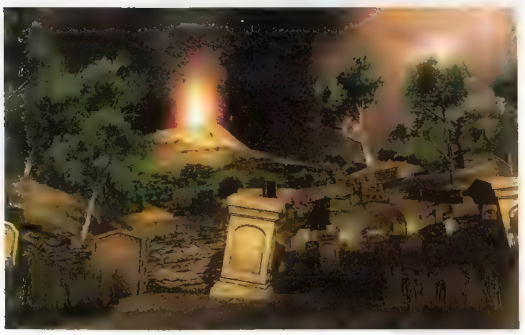
A history of violence

words Mike Griffin

If time travel fell into the right hands, those of wise and benevolent disposition might choose to use its power to observe history, not alter it. In 8monkey Labs' forthcoming epoch-hopping shooter Darkest of Days, the creators of this technology did just that: they chronicled the decline of the Mayan Empire, witnessed the raising of the monoliths at Stonehenge, and observed the greatest philosophers and scientists in their prime. Soon KronoteK's government-sanctioned forays turned to other, more specific periods of great strife and change, and previously distant and impersonal surveillance gave way to hands-on manipulation of events and individuals to ensure positive historic results.

With ties to big government, it would only be a matter of time before the technology leaked to less honorable parties, further polluting the time-space continuum. Lo and behold, the inventor of time travel has gone missing and historical anomalies have increased. As Alexander Morris, a soldier ripped from the frontlines of the Civil War, you'll journey to famous historic battlefields from ancient and modern times on behalf of KronoteK, steering historic figures through the Darkest of Days and searching for the missing Dr. Koell.

After experiencing a few levels of an early-but-promising build, I gathered up a roundtable of key figures from Phantom EFX and 8monkey Labs for an extensive Darkest of Days development update.



"The scale of our battlefields... engaging twenty, fifty, a hundred—or more, is a totally different experience."

Jeff Wilcox, 8monkey Labs

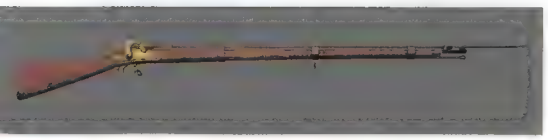
This is Pompeii in the year AD 79, one of many chaotic historical eras you'll experience in Darkest of Days. Already fleeing in terror during the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius, the panicked folk of this ancient Roman city must now contend with cybernetic agents from the future.

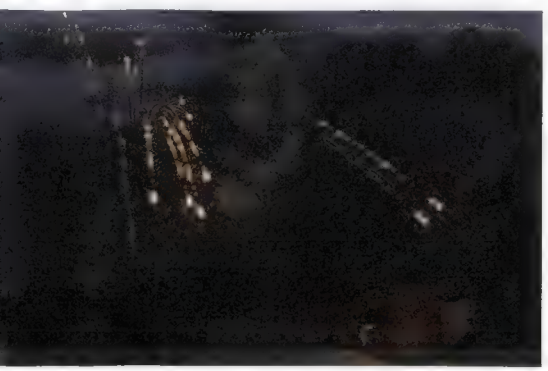
Interview

Aaron Schurman, CEO **Phantom EFX**
Bill Wadleigh, Producer **Phantom EFX**
Jeff Russell, Engine Lead **8monkey Labs**
Mark Doeden, Art Director **8monkey Labs**
Jack Monahan, Lead Level Designer **8monkey Labs**
Andres Reinot, Lead Engineer **8monkey Labs**

play: We're in a competitive industry loaded with genres and platforms. Phantom EFX comes from a successful casino game background, and now you're producing an ambitious first-person shooter. Is hardcore FPS the game you *really* wanted to make, or was it a logical business decision to select a hot genre to enter the core gamer segment?
Aaron Schurman: Darkest of Days has been a longstanding concept and story of mine since the inception of Phantom EFX. We always believed the general story and theme of the game were fantastic, but we lacked the capital to make the game. At the time, we believed making a more casual game could yield the funds to help realize our dream of making this game someday. We had no idea we would become the #1 publisher in our genre with our Reel Deal Line of slot, card and casino games, which consumed our attention for years. As we grew Phantom, we formed a completely separate company called 8monkey Labs for the creation of the Darkest of Days concept. It's been an amazing experience bringing the story of DoD to life; to invite gamers into intense, real historical events they've only read about, and try unique weaponry and tactics that as gamers we've always wanted in the FPS genre.

Shank you very much: The old Springfield rifle has a handy gut-slicing bayonet for foes that get too close.





A time-traveling concept is always intriguing. How did humans finally stumble upon the science of time travel in DoD?
Aaron: Dr. Rainer Koell, introduced in the game as a prolific inventor, has a company called KronoteK that developed time travel technology. This made him an instant celebrity and he was often referred to as the Father of Time. Dr. Koell's company has been able to keep the technology under its control, so only a handful of KronoteK employees have made expeditions to witness and record famous events in history. The company has been operating under strict rules to not alter the course of history, but rather use the technology as a research tool. Keeping history intact is KronoteK's overall objective. The government has decided that the power of time-travel will remain with one company only, its creator, as to not alter history.

Regarding Alexander, the main protagonist: is he just a normal soldier from the Civil War that dodged a bullet thanks to KronoteK intervention? What important event was he destined to be a part of?
Aaron: Alexander Morris is a soldier from the late 1800s fighting with the 7th Calvary during their expedition into the Black Hills, which resulted in an unexplored region being opened to miners and frontiersmen. He is the right man in the right place at the right time. He has no special powers or abilities, and he retains all his memories of his prior life. Morris is eventually trained and accompanied on many missions by Agent Dexter, another individual rescued before his untimely death in the first few years of the 21st century. A grizzled veteran of many battles and a loyal KronoteK employee, Dexter shows you the ropes of time-travel.

What kind of mechanics do you have—right in the thick of it—to punish and reward players for their time traveling responsibility?
Bill Wadleigh: The player soon learns that one of the main rules at KronoteK is to preserve history at all costs. Agent Dexter provides additional information to help Morris on his adventures, but the player's own choices and actions directly affect how they experience the historical storylines. During almost every battle, there are certain soldiers that are supposed to live on. The player is able to spot these important characters; if the player accidently kills these opponents, there are swift, real and dangerous consequences. Without giving too much of the storyline away, players are rewarded for making a minimal footprint during their missions; if they ignore this and simply fire at everything that moves, they will soon learn it is a far more difficult and deadly path.

Each era will have central characters that KronoteK wants to manoeuvre in some way. Do all these wanted men and women have an important destiny to fulfill?
Bill: In all cases, the wanted people are all vital to history and they are intertwined in historically vital events. There are some storylines that evoke the stopping of events before they happen, and in others the player must trigger events that will allow history to be preserved. In several cases you will do things that alter history, in which case you have to clean up and set it back to the way history intends for it to play out. Remember, players can select their path through the game, and in turn the path they choose affects future choices and available missions. There are missions that span multiple levels within a single era, but the player does not have to complete most in a specific order.

I just fought through the American Civil War in the fall of 1862 and WW1, circa 1914. The Russians and Germans *really* didn't like each other. You've also lined up Pompeii's destruction in 79 AD and some interesting WW2 fun, plus mystery timelines you're keeping a secret. How do the time travel portals function?
Bill: They are the mechanism of time travel, a short but interesting ride! And against the backdrop of preserving history and leaving a minimal footprint, the portals can't just be used anywhere. If people saw the portals, that in itself might change history, so keeping their use out of the eyes of the locals is important. You're often dropped into an area believed to be just off the beaten path of conflict, and once you're there, you have an overwhelming feeling of being dropped in the middle of it, and needing to figure out where the target is and how to reach him or her ASAP.

Is it tough to manage all the different combat styles, weapons and ballistics across such a wide range of human civilization?
Bill: In each time period you use the appropriate weapons for the age. So in the US Civil War, the 1861 Springfield rifle and the Colt Navy Pistol are standard issue. Each has its own pros and cons; the Springfield, as a single shot black powder rifle, takes time to reload

"Our lighting system is interesting: we use high dynamic range photographs of a sky to light the world."

Lead Designer, Brotherly Labs

but has devastating stopping power, while the Colt Navy was popular for its speed reload feature, but suffered diminished accuracy and stopping power. From a tactical standpoint, this means each weapon provides a different experience. When using the Springfield, the player should take into account the reload time by finding cover, using the bayonet to melee opponents, or stay back from the front lines to use friendly forces as living shields.

In any time period the player and the opponents have similar firepower and capabilities—Mosin-Nagant and Gewehr98 rifles are the mainstay of WWI battles, but there are also hand grenades available for new forms of attack and gameplay. Unless the player is using one of the wonderfully overpowered future weapons in the KronoteK arsenal, which really provides that one man army feeling, historically accurate weapons are used throughout the game—especially in Pompeii. The testers absolutely love the Civil War timeframe too; a *lot* of time was spent to make it extremely realistic, with hundreds on the screen at once, tons of battle fray all around, and the realistic experience of the weapons.

Is that one of the features that really defines your proprietary Marmoset engine?
Jeff Russell: The scale of our battlefields is something that stands out right away. In a lot of shooters, you interact with a handful of enemies at a time. But engaging twenty, fifty, a hundred—*or more*, is a totally different experience. I've had a chance to write a lot of the AI and rendering code for the project, and I can tell you that they are designed to go hand in hand and to scale as much as possible to large scenes and worlds. We can support long views with our LOD systems; most of our levels are about one to two miles on a side, and occasionally the player can see that far. Yet the renderer and our art assets need to be detailed enough that when the player stops to look at something closely, it still looks good. I think we've been able to strike a pretty good balance. Our lighting system is interesting: we use high dynamic range photographs of a sky to light the world. This combined with a powerful post-render filter system lets our designers choose between very realistic lighting or highly stylized visuals.

What kind of effort is going into the asset modeling and simulation? Have you photo-referenced authentic historical weapons, or sampled sound effects from real guns and munitions?
Mark Doeden: We've had a great opportunity to present the player with a fresh visual experience in the FPS genre, providing an environment they can truly accept, enjoy, and immerse themselves in. The fact that the locations and time periods the player is able to engage in have great historical significance has provided our team with many advantages. We've been able to pull inspiration from large collections of historical photos, get our hands on the period weaponry, and fill in a few of the information gaps with some great written personal accounts. Our art team has done a fantastic job matching the period styles of uniforms, weaponry, and the natural environments that are unique to each era.

How easy is it for your level designers to go in on their own, minus the hand-holding of programmers, and use the level editor to build engaging maps?
Jack Monahan: The technology puts it all right into the level designer's hands. With older engines, there are certain bottlenecks—pre-baked lighting, polygon limits, or hard character number limits—which meant spending as much time on the technical stuff as actually making it fun. With Habitat, our level editor, I spend my time making the game play great and look great, and not having to worry about how the engine's going to handle my 100+ character firefight.

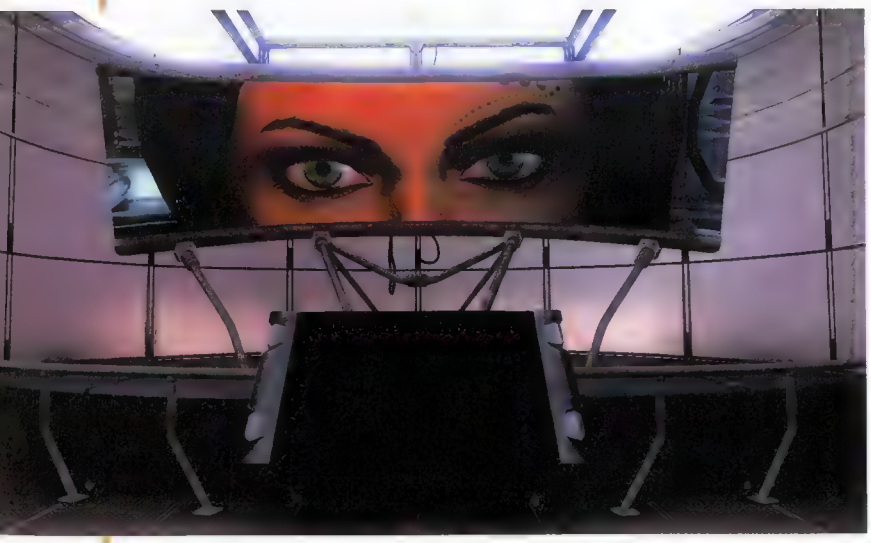
Must be tricky nailing large scale squad behaviour and realistic AI for vastly different wartime eras and situations ....

Jeff: Our approach to AI in Darkest of Days has been to—as much as possible—make a common brain for all our characters that can act differently with different tools at its disposal. For example, a German soldier in World War I and a Union soldier in the American Civil War, there's more common ground between these two guys than meets the eye. They don't want to get shot, so they will take cover; they want to kill their enemies, so they will break cover occasionally to do so; and they will try to push forward to take conquered territory. The base logic knows about its weapon, how many shots to a clip, how long it takes to reload, and can plan around all of those constraints. All this can be shared across history, and on top of this base, we layer some era-specific AI.

A designer can, for example, give the men orders to form a firing line and steadily advance on a position, 19th century-style. Or if we are making a trench battle in WWI, we can direct a mad rush for the trench by ordering them to sprint straight for an enemy position with little regard for their safety. There are of course a few totally era-specific behaviours that are automatic: twentieth century characters know to run from live grenades and how to mount stationary guns. There are characters that have a spear and a shield and this unit is, by necessity, sort of a special case that acts totally differently. But generally speaking, given higher level orders, our base AI will react and make the best of the situations it finds its self in.

Are players going to meet and engage boss characters or other special agents traveling through time? I just encountered some powerful, unidentified—yet clearly futuristic—time travelers during my stint in WW1. They weren't friendly, Dexter and I had to hop a portal back to the Mother Lab...
Bill: There are many opponents out there... most from the specific time, but there are other opponents as well to engage. Again, to some degree, when and what the player meets is dependant upon their actions during the main story missions. The game does have major battles with Boss-like opponents, some great twists, but that's all I'll say on that subject—you'll have to play the game!

After the campaign, do you have any competitive multiplayer goals for Darkest of Days? The multiplayer could be great here, with different time periods for each map. You'd have a theme for every FPS player's taste and sensibilities.
Bill: Building a new game engine, the game creation tools, and a compelling first person experience has been the primary focus of the team. The first release of the game will be a rich single player campaign on PC and Xbox 360. We're considering all options for multiplayer, but we'll let you know about those details further down the road.



This is the main chamber at KronoteK's futuristic facility where you upgrade your gun skills and receive mission briefings from a mysterious lead operative.

System: PC | Developer: Grigon Entertainment | Publisher: Turner | Multi: Browser-based MMO | Available: January

preview

FusionFall

Cartoon Network Universe

The MMO your kids can play

words Mike Griffin

"It's important to me that players know the content in FusionFall was created by Cartoon Network fans, for Cartoon Network fans. We live and breathe this stuff!"

Van Schwarz
Cartoon Network

The folks at Cartoon Network recognized an important demographic wasn't being served by MMO games: young Cartoon Network-watching gamers. FusionFall, CN's forthcoming entry, won't be dumbed down for younger players, however. Kids are too smart for that these days. Rather, the Korean developer at the helm, Grigon, has assembled a colorful and refreshing platformer MMO experience with social hubs, hundreds of missions, and loads of character customization—all within a unique alternate Cartoon Network universe featuring cameos aplenty.

"The whole East meets West style in *FusionFall* is something that we're very pleased with," Executive Producer ChrisWaldron tells **play**. "Our Art Director, Mario Piedra, worked closely with the Grigon artists to come up with this unique look. The style we arrived at was the result of a combination of Mario's deep experience with Cartoon Network art themes and the Grigon artists' imaginations."

Cartoon Network also pinpointed research that shows most kids play PC games on hand-me-down machines, the second computer in the household. The team selected a highly scalable browser-based 3D engine (Unity) that even onboard video chipsets can handle. "We're never going to go for the realistic look of Everquest II, nor the unique toon look of World of Warcraft. We have our own style for *FusionFall*, and we're pretty happy with it," Chris explains. "That being said, I play *FusionFall* on a high-end machine with the resolution and graphics settings cranked up as high as possible, and it looks gorgeous. So the eye-candy is definitely there, while still looking good for users on lower-end machines."

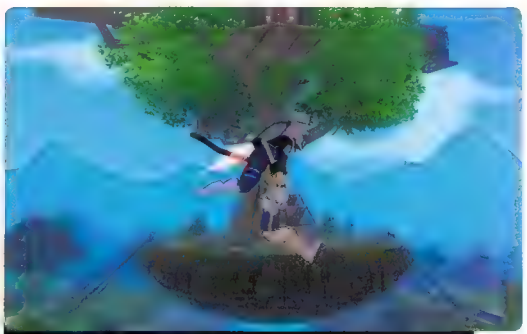
Making it easy for younger users to get signed-up and adventuring through their web browser is a great start, but these savvy Cartoon Network fans will be looking beyond the core MMO structure, in search of the source material. "We pay *very* careful attention. Even though we're taking certain liberties with the CN characters, like how we've aged Dexter and made him the head of a futuristic corporation, we do not want to undermine their individual personalities or contradict anything that exists in the lore," says FusionFall's lead writer, Matt Schwartz.

"As a fan, the prospect of developing the ultimate Cartoon Network crossover, with an alien invasion backdrop, was too good to be true," Matt gushes. "We asked ourselves questions like, 'What would happen if Dexter met Professor Utonium? Or: 'What would Samurai Jack think of the gang from Foster's? And: 'Would Billy try to pick Ben Tennyson's nose?' And so on. We actually went pretty deep, discussing the nuances of relationships that could occur in this new CN universe." Impressively, almost all of the character voices in FusionFall are performed by the original voice actors from the TV shows.

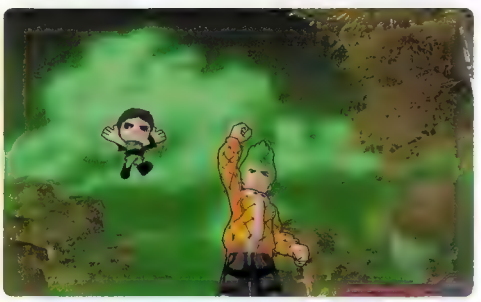
Clearly it's not possible to cover all the details of each series in the context of an online RPG, however Cartoon Network hopes that some of the finer nuances and fan service will get noticed. Matt reports: "We're already seeing players recognize the more obscure content touches, which is very rewarding. It's important to me that players know the content in *FusionFall* was created by Cartoon Network fans, for Cartoon Network fans. We live and breathe this stuff!"

The developers are currently building upon three crucial dynamics: Action, via their missions and combat; 3D platforming, which is fun and fresh in MMOs, and collecting Nanos to progress one's character and fend off the alien horde. Convenient grouping systems are also in place, but sometimes it's tough for kids to reach out. "It's definitely designed to be solo friendly too," Chris promises. "The last thing we wanted to do was design forced grouping into a kids game. Playing *FusionFall* with a group of friends certainly has benefits, though. Nano missions can be tricky for one. Also, there are boss monsters in the game that are very hard to take out by yourself when they're near the same level as you. And they do drop better loot..."

Cartoon Network is taking the long view on FusionFall, already hard at work on the first expansion to the game—featuring new areas, missions, characters, items and more. One of the biggest challenges for the team is figuring out where to go next, given the massive array of Cartoon Network lore to draw from. It's a burden they're happy to bear.



Explore the Cartoon Network Universe with your favorite characters.



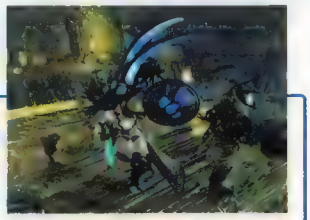
2008 YEAR IN REVIEW

Why PC gaming was great in '08

Action Role-Playing

SACRED 2: FALLEN ANGEL

ASCARON



Sacred 2 suffered a fair number of bugs immediately after its release, so we're acknowledging the smooth and stable Sacred 2, post December's patches. Sacred 2 is a gigantic seamless chunk of detailed explorable game space with loads of possible class and alignment paths. Diablo and Titan Quest players: this loot-filled blend of fantasy and light sci-fi is your designated click 'em up time killer, and you can co-op the campaign with half-a-dozen buddies, drop-in like.

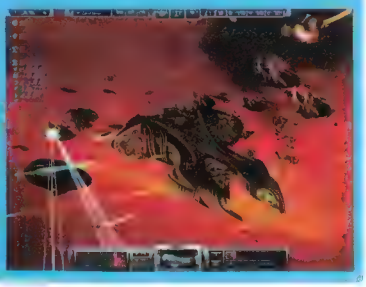
Alternative / Anti-genre

Did Spore live up to the enormous hype it had amassed? I'd say so, considering it simultaneously holds the dubious honor of most pirated PC game of 2008, and one of the NPD's top selling PC games of the year. We even had religious groups taking exception to the game's interpretation of life's origins. Had they actually played the game, as everyone probably should, they may have appreciated the idea that it's all procedural theory, ruminations on comfortable science; the only tenet Spore preaches is evolution via self-expression.

Epic Space Strategy

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

IRONCLAD



Far less epic in scope than Sins of a Solar Empire, Space Empires V is for meta-4X diehards and space [illegible] tactical galactic views to the heart of giant cosmic skirmishes.

Honorable mention:
Galactic Civilizations II: Endless Universe

First-Person Shooter – Multiplayer

LEFT 4 DEAD

[illegible]

I've wasted more hours than I'd like to admit in Left 4 Dead, a combination of Counter-Strike, Dead Island, Co-op Mod, Half-Life and Crysis Wars combined. L4D is a fine experience on PC via Steam. The mod potential, superior controls and presentation, ease of matchmaking, Steam Achievements and a great community of FPS veterans moonlighting as zombie killers make Left 4 Dead a truly joyous co-op experience on PC. Everyone can appreciate the game's outstanding level design and clever AI Director-influenced gameplay variations.

Honorable mentions:
Team Fortress 2. On PC, TF2 never dies. New maps and modes (like Goldrush—"Push little cart!"), dozens of extra achievements, new class weapons for the Medic, Heavy and Pyro, and recent Engineer upgrades all helped to refresh the appeal of Valve's gib-tastic team shooter.

Budget Saver

TANK UNIVERSAL

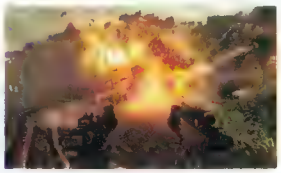
DIALOGUE DESIGN

For ten bucks, Meridian4's Tron-inspired shooter Tank Universal is better for you than a couple of low fat lattes.

First-Person Shooter – Campaign

CRYSIS WARHEAD

CRYTEK



Crytek may be the most sophisticated FPS developer on the planet, and the new Crytek Budapest studio reinforced this notion with the outstanding Crysis Warhead. Where other first-person shooters are happy to hem you in with contrived, snaking pathways and unsatisfying barriers, the Crysis formula gives you cheetah-like sprinting, super-jumping, cloaking and extra armor, all on tap, with massive open environments to explore and tear up inside your almighty Nanosuit. While there's less game here than the original (for $30 bucks it's still a great value), Warhead's darker protagonist and explosive pacing may have one-upped its predecessor.

Honorable mention:
S.t.a.l.k.e.r.: Clear Sky. Flawed, yet the Zone remains intriguing.

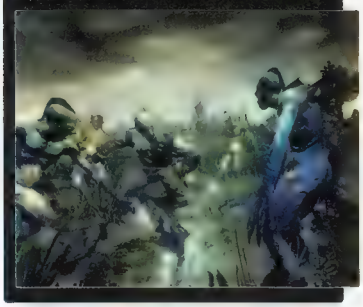
RPG

THE WITCHER: ENHANCED EDITION

CD PROJEKT RED

Normally it would be ill-advised to award a re-issued game the same kudos it earned a year earlier, but there you have it: The Witcher was lovingly polished, optimized and expanded for 2008's Enhanced Edition. It's the epitome of classic decision-and-consequence-laden PC role-playing, a 50-hour carnival of violent and idiosyncratic East European medieval fantasy.

Honorable mentions:
Fallout 3, **Mass Effect** (excellent PC adaptation).



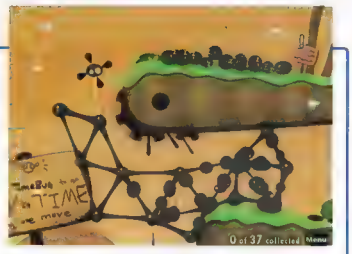
Strategic Role-Playing

[illegible]

I think this fond refurbishing of a classic form surprised us all. Though similar to turn-based strategy RPGs like Heroes of Might and Magic, King's Bounty is easier for general RPG fans to consume thanks to its quests and nuanced character progression.

Soundtrack

WORLD OF GOO
2D Boy

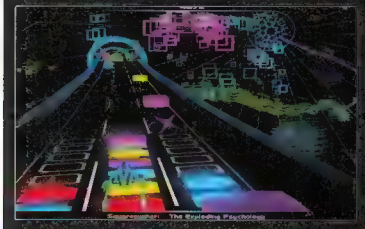


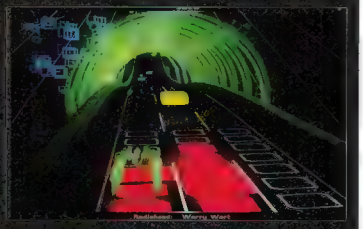
Without Kyle Gabler's fantastic compositions, it's safe to say that the World of Goo would lose some of its grandeur. Sounding more like a Danny Elfman fantasy epic than the score of an ostensibly simple-looking Flash-based 2D puzzler, Kyle's feature film-worthy soundtrack elevated the goo-building experience.

Indie highlights
The Independence of Independents

AUDIOSURF
Dylan Fitterer

After a strong showing at IGF '08, Dylan Fitterer's brilliant Audiosurf made the leap to mainstream digital distribution on Steam, instantly becoming the service's top seller for the month. The idea of a trippy tube-riding racer that dynamically forms its track layouts based on the user's music files struck a universal chord. It's almost surreal to see people recommending songs to each other as "fun tracks to ride" — later competing for high scores on the same tune. And identifying that some songs are better suited to certain modes/ships, just because. Ps: If you need a really cool long track, try "Meltdown" by Orbital. It's a fantastic 10-minute ride. And Audiosurf is a fantastic $10 indie gem.





WORLD OF GOO
2D Boy

A orld of Goo is the delightful work of a pair of ex-EA/Maxis blokes, Kyle Gabler and Ron Carmel of 2D Boy. Framed in physics-based puzzle construction concepts, innocent little Goo balls are strung together to form bridges, towers and other, more challenging shapes and connections. With its evocative backgrounds (highlighted by beautiful, warm shades and rain-soaked silhouettes), an amazing soundtrack, and the cryptic Sign Painter messages, World of Goo establishes a memorable world and narrative to contain its clever puzzle challenges.

Honorable mention: The excellent **Braid**, a melting pot of brain-massaging, time-altering platform quandaries and intensely personal ponderings. Congratulations, Jon!

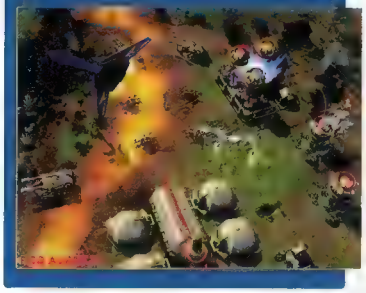
Most Wanted 2009

Real-time Military Strategy

COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT 3
EA LA

Jenny McCarthy, optimized visuals, a funny script and clever controls in a fully co-op RTS campaign? Toss in kamikaze parachuting bears and we have a deal.

Honorable mention: **Multiwinia.**



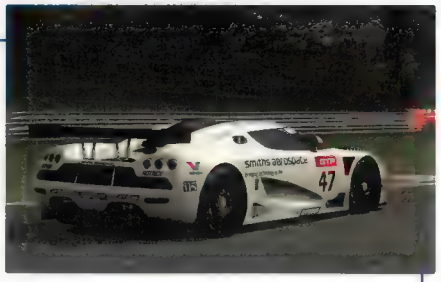
Special effect of the year: Fire!

The young female vote

NANCY DREW: THE HAUNTING OF CASTLE MALLOY
Her Interactive

Racing Driving

GTR EVOLUTION
SimBin



GTR Evolution was 2008's racing simulation king, though we'd love to see SimBin do a full overhaul of its PC graphics engine. The trackside foliage is so 2004.

Honorable mention: **GRID.** Great version of a beautiful next-gen street racer from one of the industry's hottest racing studios. From menus to tarmac, it's refined and confident.

EDITOR TILT
Mike Griffin **PC Editor**

Though PC gamers are obviously still missing out on the console exclusives, and that's a sizable quantity of essential gaming, if you were looking for multiplatform hits the PC was a fine choice in 2008. With superior, less expensive versions of games like DMC 4, Fallout 3 (dig those editing tools!), GTA IV (post-December patch), Prince of Persia and Call of Duty, the mainstream lovefest included PC at every turn. The trend continues in 2009: early on we have Mirror's Edge PC—stunning to behold at beyond 1080p resolutions, we'll have Resident Evil 5, SF IV, enhanced Last Remnant, enhanced FFXIII, the next Infinity Ward shooter (reliably superior on PC), and many others.

With big publishers swinging back to the platform in droves and a programming parity taking place between 360/PS3 and PC games, it's also going to mean less PC exclusives. We'll see developers like Crytek, CD Projekt and GSC Gameworld breaking from their PC exclusivity, a fact that is both sad and exciting. On the other hand, PC's inherent superiority in online gaming, user-generated content and digital distribution remains a clear advantage. Massively multiplayer games are finally going to escape the archetypal EQ/WoW template this year, and I can't wait to check out some of these big Fallout 3 mod projects I'm reading about. More than any other platform, PC gaming seems to empower players, giving them a sense of character and content ownership.

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REAL COMPETITION

Play Online

Premium MMORPG

WARHAMMER ONLINE
MYTHIC ENTERTAINMENT

WoW's multi-million selling Lich King expansion has since stolen the spotlight back, but that doesn't diminish the outstanding effort that is Warhammer Online. Mythic Entertainment's extensive MMO experience merged with EA's depthless coffers resulted in one of the most polished-at-launch online RPGs in recent years. It has all the trappings of your favorite MMO, with superior player vs. player, cool walk-in raids called Public Quests, and a gargantuan repository of Warhammer lore in the game's unmatched Tome of Knowledge.

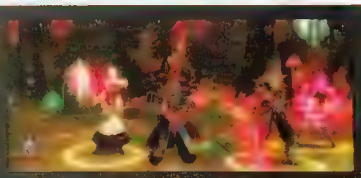
Age of Conan. Subscriber numbers are way down after a strong million+ launch and rosy honeymoon, but that doesn't diminish Funcom's impressive foray into Robert E. Howard's classic fantasy universe—possibly the best first 20 hours of any MMO.

Expansion Excellence

WRATH OF THE LICH KING
BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Three million copies later, the king continues to reign with a content-rich, graphically-upgraded second World of Warcraft expansion.

Honorable mention:
Mines of Moria. Featuring one of the largest underworld environments ever put to polygon, this Lord of the Rings Online expansion is a dungeon crawler's dream.



NDOORS

In an increasingly saturated sub-genre of Asian fantasy MMORPGs that—let's face it—a lot of hardcore gamers don't take too seriously, NDOORS' Atlantica Online offers a welcome respite. This clever turn-based MMO hybrid brings satisfying battles and high collectibility (building, naming, and equipping your mercenaries) to a unique ancient Atlantis-era Earth plagued by demons. Fans of Japanese console SRPGs may apply.

KLEI ENTERTAINMENT

While it's technically still in late beta as we round the bend into 2009, Sugar Rush was clearly one of the best things to happen to free-to-play in '08. Jeff Agala's awesome character design and artwork highlights a frenzied 2D brawler in the tradition of Smash Bros. If Smash Bros. was super high-res, online, with progressive and persistent character levels, and a huge array of avatar customizations...

Best of free-to-play

COMBAT ARMS
DOOBIC STUDIOS

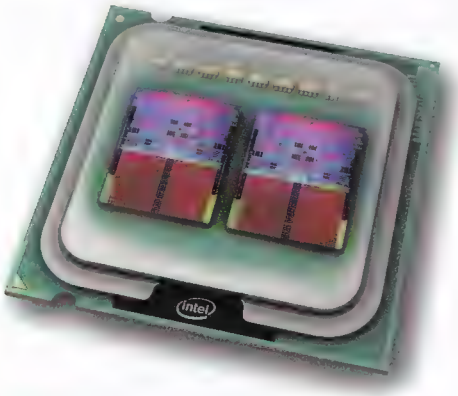
Games like Huxley and Parabellum will change the face of MMO shooters in 2009, but popular free play, lower-spec FPS titles made a big comeback in 2008—possibly reflecting the genre's current supremacy in Korea. Many of these free to download and play shooters are distasteful to Western players of premium FPS titles, often perceiving them as cheap hand-me-downs. Nexon's Combat Arms challenges that stigma with its tight action, solid maps, upgradeable soldiers and persistent profiles.

Ask Alienware

031 | 02_09

In this month's Ask Alienware we provide fan service for your processor, investigate the shattering glass and crumbling walls of CUDA and PhysX, highlight today's top motherboard features, and we examine Flash-based graphics.

q. **With modern microprocessors getting smaller and smaller, and also far more energy efficient, is it easier these days to overclock your CPU using just air/fans to manage temperatures? Are there any special tricks for air cooling that work especially well with new CPUs?**
Brice. CA.

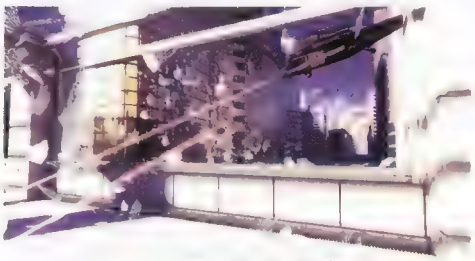


Alienware: Microprocessors are not only reducing in size and total power consumption but they are also being designed to adjust power consumption dynamically based on need. Likewise, there are numerous built-in security features that protect the microprocessor from burning out. For this reason it's getting easier to overclock without liquid cooling.

q. **Is ATI going to start supporting CUDA/PhysX acceleration on its video cards, or is Nvidia keeping this technology to itself? It's a big enough feature that it may affect my future graphics card purchases.**

Also: does Alienware advise a specific GeForce card to get the most out of PhysX games, like Mirror's Edge PC (looks awesome!)? For example, will a weaker card with less pipes and streams suffer, graphically, when it's being loaded with PhysX acceleration?
Mario, CA.

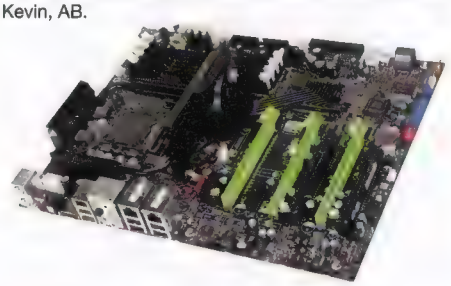
Alienware: Both ATI and NVIDIA support physics acceleration on their newer video cards. PhysX is software developed by a company called Ageia which NVIDIA acquired in early 2008. NVIDIA has now implemented the Ageia PhysX source code into



their GPU algorithm so they can take advantage of its capabilities without having to offer additional hardware. ATI created their own physics software and it is available in their latest Catalyst drivers.

q. **Is the motherboard socket standard going to remain consistent over the next while? A few years ago I was an early adopter of one of AMD's FX-series chips, and unfortunately the chip's motherboard became totally obsolete (non-upgradeable) in about 6-months!**

What absolutely key features should I be looking for in a mobo today, in order to stay future proofed?
Kevin, AB.



Alienware: The first thing to understand is there is no one set standard. Both AMD and Intel have their own motherboard socket specs, and even within the manufacturer's product line-up each technology will have its own standard. Engineers are always looking to boost bandwidth and speed. When they hit a technology's limit, something new is designed. To use Intel as an example, if you recently purchased a system running the top-end Core 2 Extreme processor, you won't be able to upgrade to Core i7 without purchasing a new motherboard. That doesn't take away from the fact that you still have a killer CPU that should last you a couple years; it just means you can't upgrade outside the processor family. Whether or not this qualifies as "obsolete" is up to you. Beyond that, there are no features you can look for to guarantee that a year down the road the upgrade you want will be compatible with your rig.

> "...there are numerous built-in security features that protect the microprocessor from burning out."

q. **Is the motherboard socket standard going to remain consistent over the next while? A few years ago I was an early adopter of one of AMD's FX-series chips, and unfortunately the chip's motherboard became totally obsolete (non-upgradeable) in about 6-months!**

What absolutely key features should I be looking for in a mobo today, in order to stay future proofed?
Kevin, AB.

Even 2D games like World of Goo that originated in Flash will benefit from superior video hardware.

Alienware: In general, browser graphics do not take advantage of your GPU. The Internet, for the most part, is a CPU-driven environment. So if you're spending more time playing Flash-based browser games, you will want to have a multi-core processor, which you would want anyway for all gaming. While Flash Player 10 features some graphics acceleration through the GPU, you should still be fine with integrated graphics.

Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest products.

NPD GROUP

PC DATABASE

POWERED BY OC Technology

February 2009

Top-Selling PC Titles November 2008

01	World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King	Blizzard
02	World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King Collector's Edition	Blizzard
03	Call Of Duty: World At War	Treyarch
04	Spore	EA
05	Fallout 3	Bethesda
06	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Blizzard
07	The Sims 2 Deluxe	EA
08	Left 4 Dead	Valve
09	The Sims 2 Apartment Life Exp. Pack	EA
10	Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3	EA

World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King

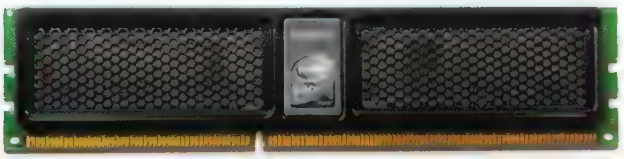
Spore

OCZ Discusses Why They are Excited About the Intel® Core™ i7 Processor

OCZ Technology, an expert in tweaking and squeezing every ounce of performance out of RAM, has been a leader in the memory market since 2002. Founded by gamers for gamers, OCZ has since been on a mission to deliver the very best PC gaming products to the masses.

The reason for OCZ's popularity is not only attributable to unparalleled performance and reliability, but also to bleeding-edge technology found first and only in their memory line. Before a new platform is launched, OCZ has already designed and engineered new solutions solely to increase performance.

OCZ VP of Technology Development, Michael Schuette, takes a moment to talk about why OCZ is excited about the latest Intel platform, the Core i7, and it's not just because you need more RAM!



Everybody is talking about Intel's latest CPU called Core i7; what's all the excitement about?

The Core i7 (formerly known as Nehalem) is currently the highest performing desktop CPU on the market, delivering an incredible breakthrough in performance.

Why did OCZ need to provide completely different memory solutions?

Instead of using a shared host bus to connect with the rest of the system, and also the memory, the Core i7 uses separate interfaces for the memory and the rest of the system. The memory subsystem is now directly connected to the processor through a highly integrated structure called the "Uncore," featuring three separate memory controllers as well as a large 8 MB L3 cache. In addition, the CPU's "logic" is sensitive to overvoltage and Intel defines the upper safe limit for the Core i7 as 1.65 volts; therefore, low-voltage memory is imperative.

Three memory controllers? What does that mean?

Unlike previous platforms which employ a dual channel memory process, Intel Core i7 supports triple channel memory configurations (i.e., 3 gigabytes, 6 gigabytes, etc.). Each memory controller should interface with at least one RAM module, that is, any given system needs at least three modules to utilize the capabilities and full benefits of the architecture.

Okay, but what are the performance benefits?

The Core i7 memory system is running the memory controller at the frequency of the "Uncore," which has to be at least twice the frequency of the memory bus itself. Compared to a memory controller running at 400MHz—which was the fastest official speed on the previous Intel architectures—the memory controller running at up to 1600MHz is up to 4 times faster than before . Overall throughput always depends on the applications running in a multitasking environment and cannot be compared from one scenario to the other but, in two simple words, the answer is "a lot!"

What is the overclocking potential of the Core i7?

Core i7 can be overclocked on air to roughly 4.1 GHz, anything much higher than that requires extreme refrigeration using non-conventional methods such as liquid nitrogen. Currently, the world record using liquid Helium is at an incredible 5.5 GHz.

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VOL.002

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FUNIMATION.COM/DARKERTHANBLACK

DARKER THAN BLACK 黒の契約者 ANIPLEX FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT

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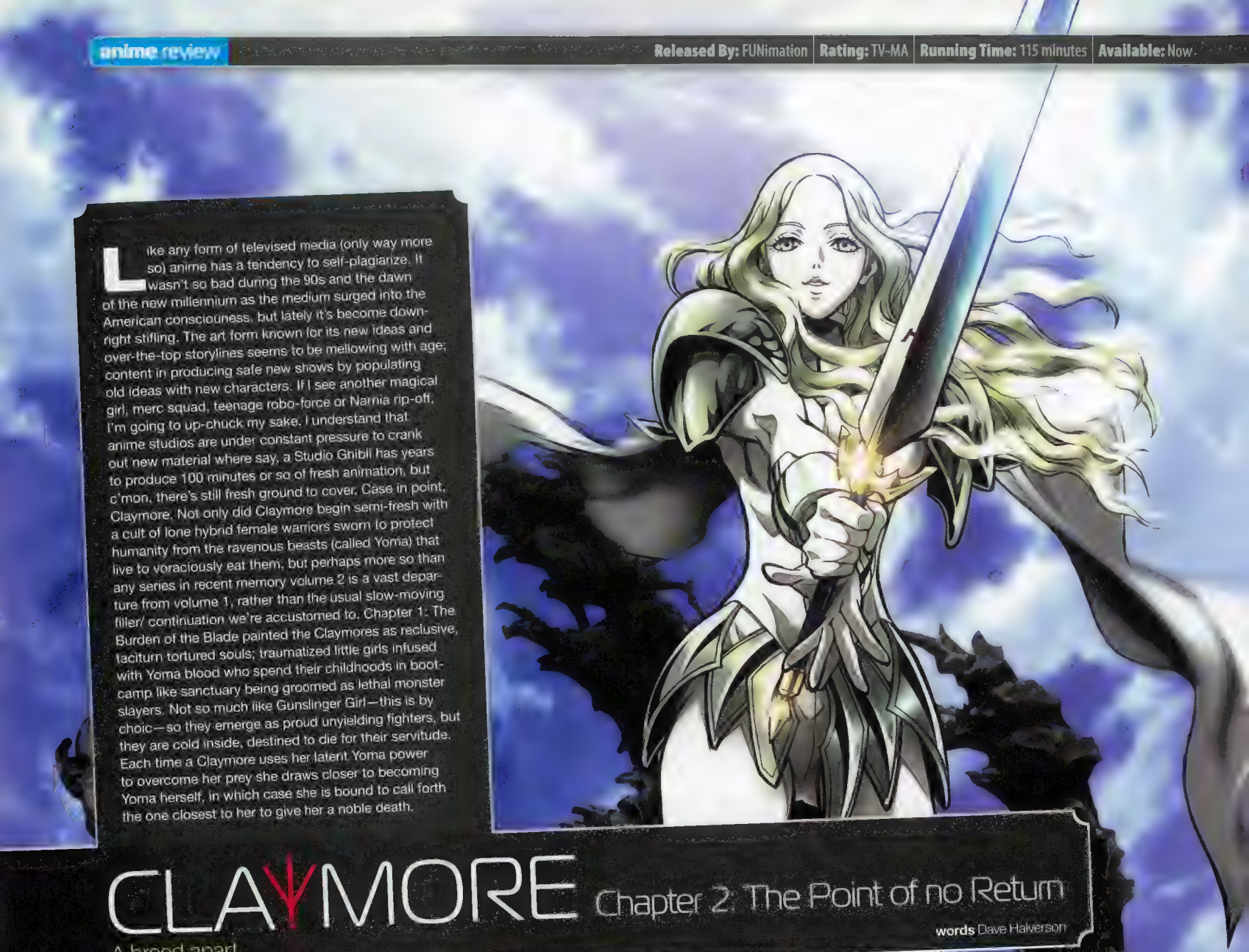
Released By: FUNimation | **Rating:** TV-MA | **Running Time:** 115 minutes | **Available:** Now



Like any form of televised media (only way more so) anime has a tendency to self-plagiarize. It wasn't so bad during the 90s and the dawn of the new millennium as the medium surged into the American consciouness, but lately it's become downright stifling. The art form known for its new ideas and over-the-top storylines seems to be mellowing with age; content in producing safe new shows by populating old ideas with new characters. If I see another magical girl, merc squad, teenage robo-force or Narnia rip-off, I'm going to up-chuck my sake. I understand that anime studios are under constant pressure to crank out new material where say, a Studio Ghibli has years to produce 100 minutes or so of fresh animation, but c'mon, there's still fresh ground to cover. Case in point, Claymore. Not only did Claymore begin semi-fresh with a cult of lone hybrid female warriors sworn to protect humanity from the ravenous beasts (called Yoma) that live to voraciously eat them, but perhaps more so than any series in recent memory volume 2 is a vast departure from volume 1, rather than the usual slow-moving filler/ continuation we're accustomed to. Chapter 1: The Burden of the Blade painted the Claymores as reclusive, taciturn tortured souls; traumatized little girls infused with Yoma blood who spend their childhoods in boot-camp like sanctuary being groomed as lethal monster slayers. Not so much like Gunslinger Girl—this is by choic—so they emerge as proud unyielding fighters, but they are cold inside, destined to die for their servitude. Each time a Claymore uses her latent Yoma power to overcome her prey she draws closer to becoming Yoma herself, in which case she is bound to call forth the one closest to her to give her a noble death.

CLAYMORE Chapter 2: The Point of no Return

A breed apart

words Dave Halverson

...Or so we were lead to believe. In Chapter 2 that sanctity and pride is replaced by a bickering horde of brainwashed, resentful (pardon the expression) über-bitches, driven by a thankless underhanded coven of control freaks working feverishly to control an infestation that they are at least partially responsible for...and does it ever hit home. The story covers the blood-soaked ground that made our protagonist Claire become a Claymore in the first place and it is a bloody wonderful ride with a bombshell of a story arc that breaks all of the taboos. Don't even read the box, just sit back and watch the body count rise.

parting shot

Faithfully adapted from the Weekly Shōnen Jump manga, Madhouse has given Claymore an elegant, subdued look all its own along with animation far superior to what we've come to expect from a 26-episode TV series. Most of all however, Claymore is original, nearly cliché-free (so far so good) anime for grown-ups, and there's not a whole lot of that going around. The nauseatingly timid portrayal of Claire's human companion Raki remains the only fly in an otherwise delectable ointment.

DRAGON BALL Z REMASTERED

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TOEI ANIMATION FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT

Released By: FUNimation | Rating: TV-14 | Running Time: 288 minutes | Episodes: 24 | Volume: Box Set | Available: Now

Le Chevalier D'Eon

French Kiss of Death

words Bill Gray

Thanks to the consolidation of the anime industry, FUNimation has been releasing properties it acquired from Geneon and ADV at a fever pitch. And not just volumes from all those series that are in progress either, like Black Lagoon and Devil May Cry. Box sets of the most recent series both goliaths had to offer from '07 and '08 are also peppering anime aisles, resulting in an unprecedented deluge of triple-A anime. There's never been a better time to go anime shopping, regardless of your monthly media coffer. Series like FUNimation's Claymore, Bandai's Gurren Lagann and VIZ' Blue Dragon are still in single- volumes and because thin packs take up so little shelf space—along with the overall slower paced market—box sets like *Le Chevalier D'Aeon* should remain on store shelves for as long as supplies last. Otherwise, even the most ardent fan might miss gems like *Le Chevalier D'Aeon*; one of the best aeries of 2007, if not the decade.

After his sister, Lia de Beaumont, turns up dead in the Seine, the French chevalier D'Eon and his friends must unravel the secrets of the continent-spanning conspiracy that caused her death. In a move unusual for a typical anime, *Le Chevalier* tries to be fairly true to its historical roots. For example, the real D'Aeon was in fact a French spy, who sometimes dressed as a woman to avoid detection. Characters such as Robespierre, the Duke D'Orleans, even several French kings, all figure heavily in the plot. Of course, the anime takes a few teensy-weensy liberties. Things like mercury-filled zombies, nefarious magical powers, and D'Aeon's ability to channel the soul of his dead sister *probably* didn't happen in 19th century France. Probably.

With FUNi's new box set, you can unravel the twisted plots, delve deeper into the production and history that went into making the show, and glory in the sumptuous animation and character design from Production IG—all for a glitteringly attractive thin-pack price.

"In a move unusual for a typical anime, Le Chevalier tries to be fairly true to its historical roots."

parting shot

There isn't a single reason to pass on "Le Chev" other than a mercury-filled zombie at your front door, in which case they're easily dispatched by hatchet, axe, or sword.

anime review | Released By: FUNimation | Rating: TV-MA | Avail: Spring 2009

Strain: Strategic Armored Infantry

Cure for the Common Anime

Bet you've never heard of Frances Hodgson Burnett. The 19th century author is best known for children's stories such as *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*, which form the loose basis for one of FUNimation's spring releases, *Strain*. Like any self-respecting anime company, Studio Fantasia takes some of the concepts of Burnett's novels, loads them into giant mecha, and blasts them into outer space. Frances never saw that coming, I'm sure!

Sara Werec, a young, impressionable girl, vows to become a mecha pilot fighting for the galactic Union against the implacable Deague to join her brother, Ralph, on the front lines of the war. On the eve of graduating from the Academy, the Deague attack and wipe out everything and everyone Sara holds dear. To her utter shock, her beloved Ralph leads the strike against the Union, personally killing many of her friends. Though she loses her customized mecha, known as a "Strain," in the conflagration, Sara vows to discover the truth of her brother's treason, no matter the personal cost.

Strain features some fairly complex and fluid mecha combat, which stands in sharp contrast to the relatively stiff character animation. Though better than, say, *Robotech: TSC*, Sara and her fellow soldiers interact awkwardly—perhaps the studio blew its budget on the action sequences and scrimped on the actual story animation. That's a shame—the fascinating story of Sara's revenge quest, and the galaxy of the Union and the Deague deserve better. Heck, Frances Hodgson Burnett deserves better! **Bill Gray**

"Strain features some fairly complex and fluid mecha combat . . ."

parting shot

A strangely addictive series loaded with promise—though it won't make you forget Gundam anytime soon.

THE HORRORS OF WAR
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Released By: FUNimation | **Rating:** TV-MA | **Running Time:** 315 minutes | **Volume:** 1 | **Available:** Now

Negima!?

Same Faces, Tiny Pieces

words by Carl Gray

As if the *Negima!* series weren't confusing enough, what with its 40-odd characters, twisting story arcs, and tangled relationships, FUNimation has recently released a "re-imagining" of the series. Titled simply *Negima!?* (note the question mark—that's the only real difference in the titles), the series begins with the same ingredients, but cooks up a markedly different pot o' stew.

Let's review the ingredients, shall we? Take one part shy, pre-pubescent wizard—the younger, more non-threatening, the better—and mix with 31 Japanese junior high school girls. Be sure to make each girl as different as possible, from android, to vampire, to ghost, to demon. Combine, and set the mixture against an evil power possessing various girls and a missing artifact called the Star Crystal. Mix with plenty of humor and a dash of weirdness, and viola! You have *Negima!?*

More action-oriented and less relationship-driven than the original anime (*Negima: Masgister Negi Magi* for those scoring at home), *Negima!?* is a credible new take on the series based on Ken Akamatsu's sprawling manga series. Negi, the titular young wizard, remains as friendly, shy, and helpful as ever, and the girls' personalities seem to have survived the transition to a new series intact. Certain story arcs that have been compressed, notably the Evangeline arc, which takes up a paltry two episodes, leaving more room for the newer material centering around a mysterious magical artifact known as the Star Crystal.

One of the original *Negima!*'s hallmarks was its visually dense scenes and cute character designs on the various girls of class 2-A. Thankfully, production quality hasn't suffered one iota under new animation studio Shaft—each episode is crammed with verbal and visual puns and parodies, while still maintaining an ultra-clean and fluid look. And even though this is technically a new series, the original FUNimation voice cast reprises all of their roles in the series, notably the scratchy-voiced Greg Ayres as Negi. Finally, one of the best features of all is something that's common to most new series FUNi's releasing these days—you get 12 episodes per volume instead of the paltry four.

The best part about *Negima!?* though, is its effortless storytelling. Trimmed to a (relatively) short run of 24 episodes, the plot moves you along without losing you—either with the overwhelming number of characters or by bogging you down in tedious detail. It's an impressive feat when you have a cast as big as *Negima!?*'s, no matter what version you're watching.

parting shot

Fun for old Negima! hands and new fans alike. A fun, funny new take on Negi's story from FUNi.

"Take one part shy, pre-pubescent wizard . . . mix with 31 Japanese junior high school girls [with] each girl as different as possible . . ."

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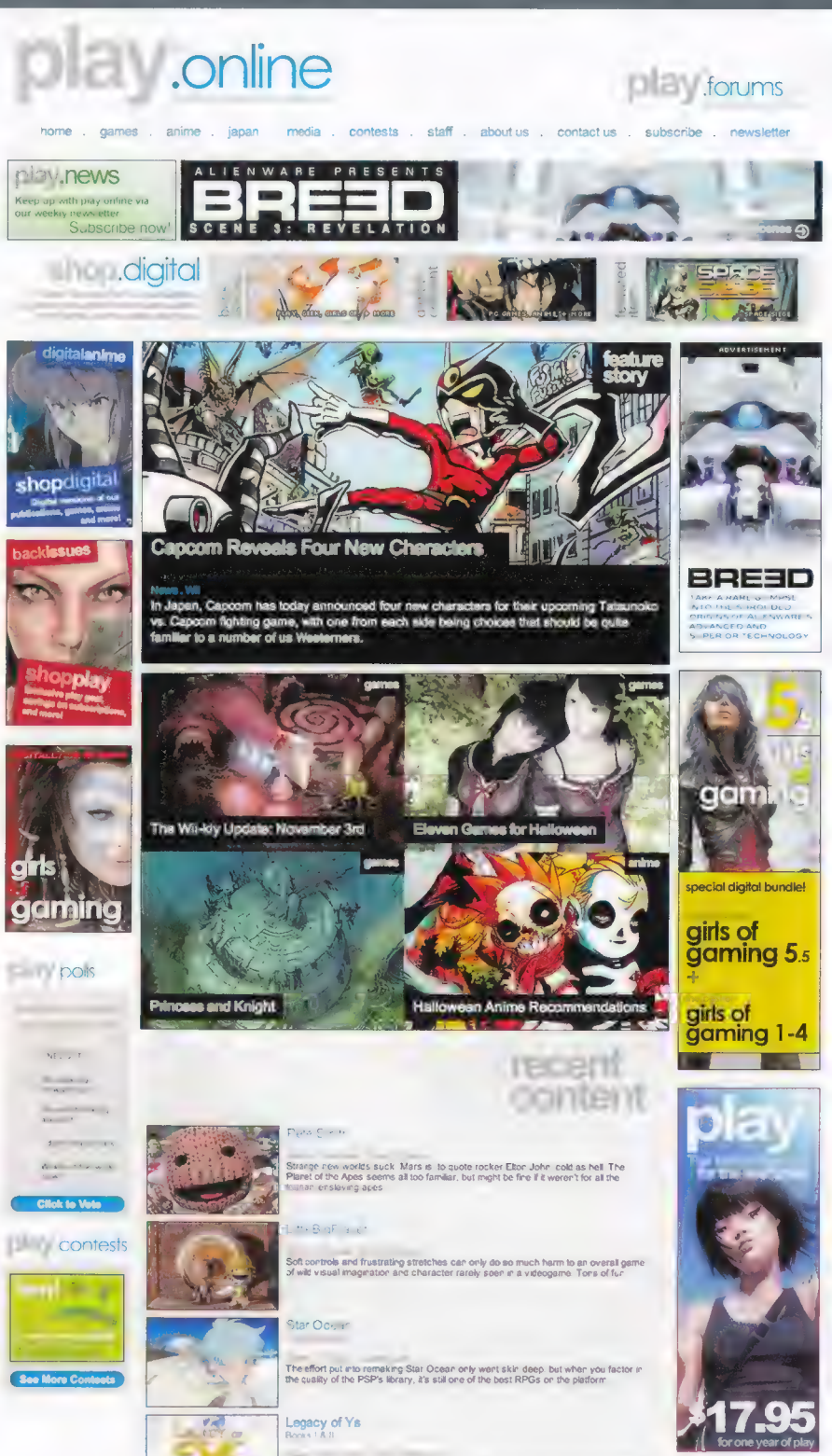
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Capcom Reveals Four New Characters
In Japan, Capcom has today announced four new characters for their upcoming Tatsunoko vs. Capcom fighting game, with one from each side being choices that should be quite familiar to a number of us Westerners.
The Wii-kly Update: November 3rd
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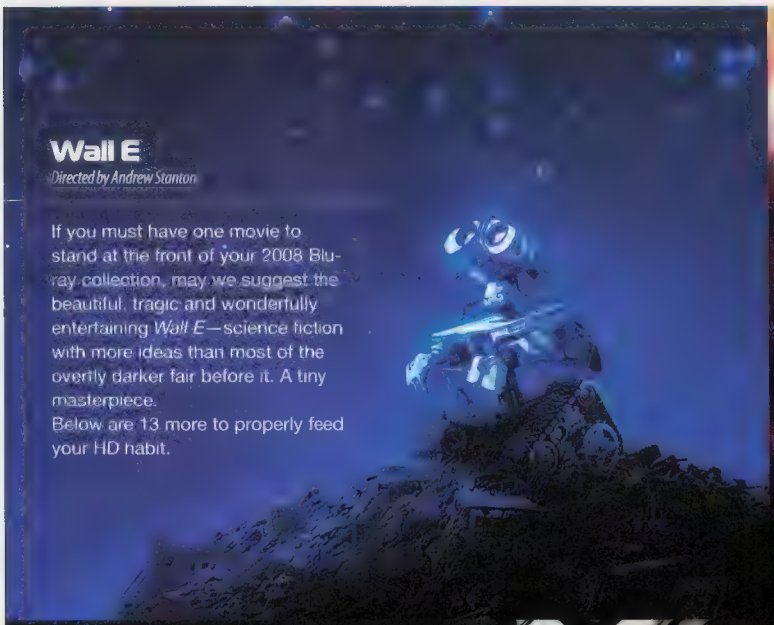
Strange new worlds suck. Mars is, to quote rocker Elton John, cold as hell. The Planet of the Apes seems all too familiar, but might be fine if it weren't for all the human-enslaving apes.
Soft controls and frustrating stretches can only do so much harm to an overall game of wild visual imagination and character rarely seen in a videogame. Tons of fun
Star Ocean
The effort put into remaking Star Ocean only went skin deep, but when you factor in the quality of the PSP's library, it's still one of the best RPGs on the platform
Legacy of Ys
Thanks to Atlus, North America DS owners will be able to get their hands on Legacy of Ys: Books I & II next February.
play
17.95
for one year of play

14 Movies You MUST See on Blu-ray



Wall E
Directed by Andrew Stanton

If you must have one movie to stand at the front of your 2008 Blu-ray collection, may we suggest the beautiful, tragic and wonderfully entertaining *Wall E*—science fiction with more ideas than most of the overtly darker fair before it. A tiny masterpiece.
Below are 13 more to properly feed your HD habit.

Hellboy 2

There Will Be Blood

Into The Wild

Sweeny Todd

Wall E

06.27.08
Disney·PIXAR

Into The Wild
Directed by Sean Penn

There Will Be Blood
Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

Hellboy 2
Directed by Guillermo Del Toro

No Country For Old Men
Directed by Cohen Brothers

Dark Knight
Directed by Christopher Nolan

Iron Man
Directed by Jon Favreau

Speed Racer
Directed by Wachowski Brothers

Dark City
Directed by Alex Proyas

Sweeny Todd
Directed by Tim Burton

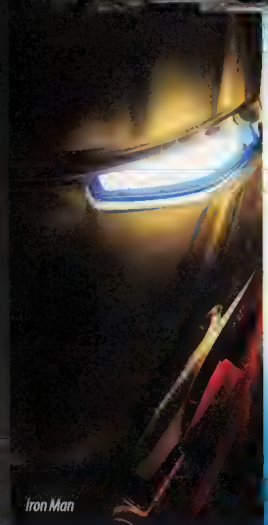
The Ultimate Matrix Collection
Directed by Wachowski Brothers

Kill Bill Vols. 1 & 2
Directed by Quentin Tarantino

Planet Terror / Death Proof
Directed by Tarantino / Rodriguez

Starship Troopers
Directed by Paul Verhoeven

Bonus pick No 15 you may have missed last year in HD: **The Fountain**
Darren Aronofsky



Iron Man

Dark City

The Shop

words David Bruno

8-Bit Tie

Because the 8-bit T-shirt was just too uncomfortable.

It really goes without saying that some of the best videogames in existence have humble beginnings on cartridge-based consoles: Super Mario Brothers, Metroid, Ninja Gaiden, Metal Gear, Final Fantasy, Castlevania and the list goes on. And just because they've all made the jump to a more conventional format (disc) there is certainly no reason that you can't show your love for the 8-bit era. An era before high-definition gaming, where the RF-adapter was the standard method for connecting your console to your wood-framed television.

I declare these the halcyon days of gaming. Now with Think Geek's 8-bit Tie you can proudly display your old-school gaming roots while looking rather dapper in the process. **$14.99** *Buy it from ThinkGeek* (http://www.thinkgeek.com/tshirts-apparel/hats-ties/9352/?cpg=ab) (Available in Classic Blue and Power Red)

Odin Sphere 1/8 Scale Pre-Painted PVC Figure: Gwendolyn

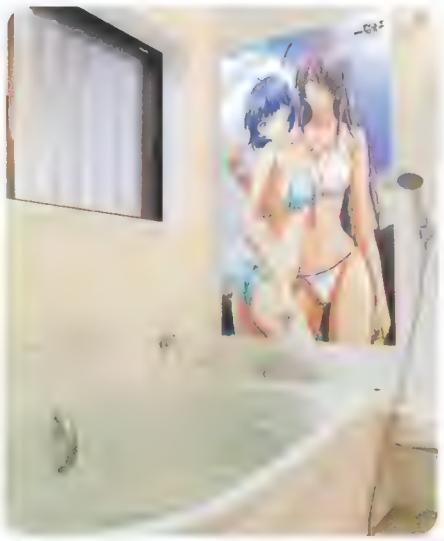
Still wrapped up in the gorgeous Norse world of *Odin Sphere*..? So are we. Well, now you can take a piece of it home with you. Standing tall at a whopping 35 centimeters, this highly-detailed, pre-painted PVC figure successfully captures Gwendolyn in all of her elegance and beauty. The Valkyrie daughter of the Demon Lord Odin is looking for a cozy new home and a dust-free shelf to proudly display her on. Just be careful where you're pointin' that Psypher spear. Phozons not included. **$79.90** *Buy it from Play-Asia* (http://www.play-asia.com/paOS-13-71-8x-49-en-70-2z4f.html)

Ikki Tousen -Great Guardians- Kanu & Ryomou Bathroom Poster

Are your bathroom walls bare? Tired of staring at those bland white tiles lining your shower? No artificially scented soap in existence is going to stimulate your...senses and wake you up like this sexy Ikki Tousen poster will. Measuring in at 20.3" x 28.7", the very sexy and very revealing poster features the lovely Kanu Unchou and Ryomou Shimei in their Sunday best. Oh, and did I mention that it's waterproof? **$13.28** *Hobby Search* (http://www.1999.co.jp/eng/10079382)

Gurren Lagann Yoko Cushion Cover

Just because you're sleeping on a futon doesn't mean that you can't have a good night's rest. Discard those flat, drool stained pillows and radically improve your sleeping condition with the Gurren Lagann cushion cover featuring anime's hottest heroine, Yoko Littner. At 150cm by 50cm, this double-sided, smooth-as-silk cover fits most standard body pillows like a glove. And until they start printing Gurren Lagann bed sheets, those faded Star Wars ones stretched over that lopsided mattress of yours will have to suffice. So this winter take a break from those late-night gaming sessions and snuggle up with this buxom babe. Body pillow not included. **$95.48** *Hobby Search* (http://www.1999.co.jp/eng/10061793)



BACK OF THE BOOK

02_09 HEATHER CAMPBELL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Do We Only Like Games We're Good At?

> " ... there's a cadence to a good game that ticks like a metronome, swinging between tough and easy."

It has occurred to me many times that I only enjoy Street Fighter because I'm good at it. I mean, I'm no tournament player, and I'm not even that technically proficient. But I'm capable. And competitive play is more enjoyable when you've got a chance at winning. Street Fighter, as we know, is a competitive game.

So, I celebrate Street Fighter because I'm good at engaging it. Because I get the gestures, because I can understand two-in-ones. But if Street Fighter were just a little more complicated, there's a chance I would have never gotten into it. And as a result, I may never have appreciated its intricacies. Hell, I might have even dismissed it.

Alpha 3 is one of those games that didn't feel right to me. But maybe it's a good game, and I'm just a bad player. I like Alpha 2 more than Alpha 3 ... but is A2 a better game?

This makes me wonder: How many games have I brushed off because I couldn't get into them? Have I stopped playing games because I'm not good enough to enjoy them? Have I hated on titles, not because of their shortcomings, but because of my own?

Is Tekken a good game?

Let me think about that for a moment.

No, it can't be. No way. I mean, just look at it. It's like someone threw up a New Year's Eve party.

But certainly this concern is something that the entire industry has. If a game is too difficult, it's not going to sell well. Critics might turn up their noses because the controls are impossible to master. In response, games have gotten easier ... so more people think the games are good.

Maybe that explains the success of mini-games. They don't offend anyone, except the players who are too proud of their own proficiency. You know, the defensive gamers who are quick to say, "Hey, my hobby takes skill!" Gamers like me.

Some extraordinary developers have found a sweet spot between challenge and disappointment. They tickle the place between two extremes, giving gamers moments of difficulty and simplicity. A screen full of enemies is followed by a ladder; a particularly hard boss unlocks a new power. It's not just risk and reward -- there's a cadence to a good game that ticks like a metronome, swinging between tough and easy.

But more often than not, developers just dial down the difficulty, and we breeze through a game that we're not particularly good at playing. Devil May Cry 4 was one of those games for me; I never really felt like I mastered anything about it, but still managed to mash my way through to the end credits.

Don't worry, I'm not about to say something pretentious about the dumbing-down of media culture and how it relates to video-game difficulty. I've already done something like that once this issue.

Sigh.

I miss the old-school challenges, as represented by games like Megaman 9. Though I may not *like* a game as much if I can't get deep into it, a difficult game allows me to feel better about myself after I master a particularly rough section. Rewards used to come in the form of personal pride, not Trophies or Achievements. Taking on a game was its own reward.

This may be why versus play still exists; it fills the chasm left by a lack of single-player difficulty. Developers should take a look at the continued success of Halo 3's multiplayer, and ask if it represents more than a "robust online community." Maybe people are playing tons of Halo 3 multiplayer because the standard game is so stupidly easy.

But then again, maybe the game is easy so that more people like it.

If I were a games designer (by the way, anyone reading this that wants to make that a reality, I am accepting cheques for ideas about games centered around jumping and/or social anxiety), I would release a weekly challenge game for Live and PSN -- something small, difficult, and Trophy-less. Like the micro-genre of *Maso-core* or *Platformer Hell* or whatever they're calling it these days (Google "I Wanna Be The Guy" for more info), the point of these games would be getting past them. There has to be space in the industry for this type of title. Hell, Nintendo taught us that there's room in the industry for games that don't require any skill at all to play; there must be a place for games with a prerequisite of top shelf hand-eye co-ordination.

Or am I the only one getting a little bored with breezy games?

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